I

Machiavelli’s Succession Problem

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to connect the two principal themes of the book, mostly unstudied and hardly noticed in Machiavelli scholarship, of effectual truth and succession. The first is the single phrase, invented by him, in which he sums up the new truth he has found and distinguishes it from the use or abuse of imagination in ineffectual truth. The second is the problem resulting from the application of that phrase to himself: what is his effectual truth? What effect can he cause, not only while he lives but also after he dies? Can he plan his own effect and direct his own fortune and influence? Can he secure his succession, and, like one of the princes he writes about, maintain what he first acquires? I begin from effectual truth and move to succession.

WHAT EFFECTUAL MEANS

Machiavelli appears to have invented the word effectual. He used it to qualify a kind of truth: the effectual truth. Machiavelli’s “effectual truth” (verità effet- tuale) appears in the first paragraph of chapter 15 of The Prince. There it is contrasted with a rival understanding of truth: “the effectual truth of the thing rather than the imagination of it.” One might think that the phrase would have attracted the attention of principal claimants to truth or guardians of truth – philosophers – or inquirers into the origin of phrases and concepts – historians and philologists – but it hasn’t. Its words are passed over without reflection or even notice and its meaning is usually taken to announce the realism for which Machiavelli is reasonably given credit: the realism of modern science, modern philosophy, and modern politics that thrived in the West until it was confronted by the modern idealism of Rousseau and Kant. But the particular contrast in which Machiavelli himself confronts his delivery of effectual truth with the imaginative truth he regards as dominant in his time is hardly ever studied. His pregnant words are left unborn or unproductive. The Italian effettuale is...
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usually translated in English as “effective,” which means having the potential for an effect rather than actually having made one. Above all, the novelty of the word has not been noticed and the signal it sends to all and sundry is left unobserved even though its message to readers, particularly scholarly readers in our time, seems clear if not loud. For the fact is that this is the only time that Machiavelli, in all his writings, ever uses that word or that phrase.

Further, the word “effectual” and the phrase “effectual truth” that he apparently invented – to use both word and phrase only once – do not occur in any writing of the Italian Renaissance. Nor have I been able to find any use of the “effectual truth” prior to Machiavelli. That Machiavelli says it just once, and in a place where it can hardly be missed by an attentive reader, is a sign of its importance, not a slip of the pen. That it has no source has almost deprived it of the attention of scholars. What it signifies is something newly formulated and as weighty as the founding of modernity by the philosopher Machiavelli. I assert these brave words – that modernity had a founding rather than an emergence, a founding by a philosopher, the philosopher being Machiavelli, who was a philosopher – because I cannot prove them. A proof of strict necessity is probably impossible; even proper elaboration is beyond my capacity. But I propose these assertions and offer evidence that cannot be ignored even if it has not been completed. The difficulty of proof is at first greatly increased by Machiavelli’s use of irony, which requires him to contradict himself deliberately and to say something different from, even the contrary to, what he says literally. In a letter he once said literally that he was “a doctor of the art” of lying: “For some time now I have never said what I believe or never believed what I said, and if indeed I sometimes tell the truth, I hide it behind so many lies that it is hard to find.”

Readers of Machiavelli, to be worthy of their reading, should keep these words before them as they proceed. With practice one learns to pick up his hints, laugh at them, and enjoy seeking the truth that is hard to find. But finding this truth requires the use of one’s imagination, we shall see, despite the doubt Machiavelli raises about that use.

Effectual truth looks to the effect of one’s action as opposed to the imagination of it. The imagination is in the good one imagines will result: the intent. Machiavelli speaks of the effectual truth “of the thing” and does not mention any intent behind the action in order to stress the effect as a thing by itself rather than as the consequence of what one intends. The effect is thus a deed

1 My announcement of this apparent fact in Machiavelli’s Virtue, 19 (1996) has produced no objection.

2 Manent, to whose kindred thoughts on effectual truth I am indebted: Metamorphoses of the City, 7–8, 24–25, 155–157, 203; Enquête sur la democratie, 305–306, 313; The City of Man, 45, 194; Sfez, Machiavel, Le Prince Sans Qualités, 235; Lefort, “La Verità Effettuale,” in Ecrire; Kennington, On Modern Origins, 68; Mayfield, Artful Immorality, 147.

3 Roecklein, Machiavelli and Epicureanism, 119.

4 A test example for the attentive reader might be the use of the word “barbarian” in P 26.

5 NM, Letter to Guicciardini, 17 May 1521.
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separated from its intent, whether that intent is a human choice, such as a virtue, a choice to do good, or a purpose attributed to nature, such as the notion that humans naturally intend to do good. Today we would call this effect “fact.” Fact is a modern word not found before Machiavelli nor used by him, but the notion of it was discovered by him. Effectual truth could also be called “factual truth,” as both fact and effect come from the Latin facere (to make, do). Fact is stubborn and effect is often contrary to one’s intent or wish. A prime example is in the virtue of liberality featured in Aristotle’s list of the moral virtues and discussed as a “quality” in chapter 16 of The Prince. If you try to be liberal or generous, Machiavelli shows, the effect will be the contrary: a reputation for stinginess. This is the stubborn effectual consequence of actions undertaken with wishful intent.

Machiavelli’s effectual truth is opposed to the truth according to nature. Nature was the original discovery of the first philosopher, Thales, who discovered the distinction between things in themselves and things as they were agreed to by human beings, who might attribute their character to creation by the gods or God. The former was nature (physis), the latter convention (nomos); the former was unchangeable, that to which humans had to adjust themselves, and the latter changeable, consisting of those adjustments in custom and legislation. In establishing custom and making laws, humans had to act according to the nature of things if they wished to succeed. But the nature of a thing is its completion or perfection, what it is at its best, for when defining a thing one includes everything that belongs to it and excludes what is accidental – perhaps the sacredness added to it by convention. Particularly when the distinction between nature and convention is applied to the virtues, the standard for action becomes one’s intent to follow the nature of the particular virtue (such as liberality mentioned earlier) imagined at its best. But Machiavelli objects that this truth of imagination will be prevented by the actual effects of the virtue, and that the virtue will have the effect not of its perfect nature but of its imperfect reception or how it is “held” (tenuto) as opposed to how it is according to its nature. Liberality according to its nature (as imagined perfect) would be received as virtuous and understood as intended. But it is actually, or effectually, received in stages, first as beneficial with surprise, then expected as routine, and last as vicious when denied – as in time it must be when the cost of practicing virtue is felt. Thus, the standard of “according to nature,” especially of the Socratic tradition that recommends virtue, must be dropped. To take the example Machiavelli must have had in mind, Plato’s Republic, Socrates seeks justice as it is “according to nature”; this is the standard Machiavelli rejects.

Machiavelli has a replacement to recommend. In the same paragraph as “effectual truth” he says that since acting with a “profession of good” will bring you to ruin, it is necessary for the prince to learn to be able to be not good and to use this and not use it “according to necessity.” Necessity has the same double character as nature. Just as nature means both “spontaneous,” as in “doing what comes naturally,” and deliberately by choice “according to
nature,” so necessity means doing what is compelling and urgent regardless of everything else and “according to necessity,” perhaps in the long run, by deliberate choice.

Necessity pays no regard to the complete nature of a virtue that is distinct from accidental circumstances. Virtue in its nature is critical of impediments such as one’s self-interest that might, for instance, make one hesitate to give because liberality is costly. “You can afford to give,” says virtue. Necessity overrides the distinction between nature and accident or chance in its sovereign insistence on urgency and the pressing demands of one’s self. Virtue takes its chances with present circumstances, satisfied with what seems now to be enough, but necessity looks to future necessities that it must anticipate. Necessity judges by the extreme case that virtue thinks unlikely and will face when it must – “sufficient to the day is the evil thereof” – but necessity wants a universal standard that will hold in every situation. It judges the normal by the extreme and thereby abolishes the normal, for the normal is the realm of moral virtue that humans believe they can afford. Thus nature and accident are made one: nature is denied its distinctiveness from chance and chance is made the necessary accomplishment of nature. One must practice a liberality that is secure from exhaustion by its cost. How to do this? Arrange your liberality to be paid for by others. The effectual truth of liberality is exploitation concealed by insincerity.

The effectual truth leads away from nature, with its correlative of chance, to necessity, which is divided among the various necessities that can be calculated to curtail, diminish, or conquer the influence of chance. Nature is composed of natures, and necessity of necessities. These are necessities of behavior, not of form or substance. Effectual truth yields efficient causes productive of effects and does not respect or need to respect distinctions of form or ends of action, the formal and final causes of Aristotle. Form is rarely or never perfect; end is often unachieved. Nature’s power is clouded and dispersed by the unpredictable but somehow inevitable power of chance. By replacing nature with necessity, however, exactness can be achieved through the clarity of cause and effect, avoiding the disconcerting spectacle of nature surprised by chance.

All this goes to show the power of Machiavelli’s effectual truth. It opens to view Machiavelli’s insight into the future he anticipates more or less clearly of modern science. Modern science is exact because it attends to behavior and disposes of natures. It focuses on the extreme case that includes all other cases and makes universal laws of nature understood in the new sense of overriding all formal and substantial differences. Such laws can arrive at universality by resting on the matter not of this or that thing or being but common to all differences and distinctions. The universal extreme case makes possible the critical experiment that decides the answer to a question from one instance of it. With it science can be seen as “falsifiable,” as is said today, rather than merely probable and resting on an assertion capable of being explained by other causes that are not extreme. With one extreme example Machiavelli shows a general and fundamental truth near the beginning of his *Discourses on*
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Livy. He considers the extreme case of Romulus, founder of Rome, who had to kill his brother in order to be alone as the founder. This single case shows the necessity of being alone, so as not to be opposed or distracted in founding, and the necessity of going so far as to “take care of your brother” in order to follow the first necessity. Romulus, disposing of Remus, typifies and excuses the kind of crime necessary at the beginnings of great accomplishments. As the founder of the greatest political regime known so far, he is the critical case that establishes the universal truth.

The materialism of modern science comes out of Machiavelli’s disarming of human intent, robbing it of effect, as shown in his failure to refer to “soul” in his two major works, The Prince and the Discourses on Livy. The soul, shrouded and invisible, with all its problems of harmony and capability, is banished from science together with intent as a nonmaterial cause. (Imagination will be needed, though disciplined, as will be seen.) With all these characteristics of modern science Machiavelli can be recognized as supplying its fundamental basis if not yet the mathematical expression by which it creates its own forms apart from nature’s. Dealing with human beings he could not study them in a laboratory, and wishing to deal directly with actual humans as they are he did not conceive a formal state of nature like later liberals, designed like a laboratory to strip humans of convention and show them in pure nature. Instead, he used examples of extreme behavior, one of them of a tyrant in Perugia who failed to be “altogether wicked” when he had a choice opportunity of surpassing greatness “to leave an eternal memory of himself.” Machiavelli laments and corrects his failure, furnishing an example of pure nature out of his own brain. Machiavelli’s often comical extremism – in this case a bizarre solution for papal intrusiveness in politics – is his anticipation of the scientific laboratory, where he can experiment with the effect of shock. Instead of stripping human nature of convention in the state of nature he shows how a prince can use conventional virtues by testing their resistance to being blatantly violated, thus submitting the ordinary (typical selfish behavior) to the discipline of the extraordinary or altogether wicked (unthinkably criminal).

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The necessity to act according to necessity makes necessity, as said earlier, both a compelling force of spontaneity and a standard for deliberate choice. This means that necessity is both descriptive and normative, for Machiavelli’s

6 D 1.9.2; cf. 1.18.5. In the first citation, Machiavelli gives Romulus’s intent as both to make himself alone and to aid the common good; the second “to be alone” is by itself with no companion goal in the “common good” to mitigate its shock. Machiavelli moves from imaginary to effectual truth. Cf. Mansfield, Machiavelli’s Virtue, ch. 3.

7 D 1.27; see Mansfield, Machiavelli’s New Modes and Orders, 100–101. See also Manent, Enquête sur la démocratie, 284–287.
realism draws values from facts rather than separating values from facts. The “is” of necessity leads to the “ought” of necessity. In fact (note how this ever-so-familiar phrase is used), one has no choice, and if there seems to be a choice, one must choose as if one had no choice. Thus, Rome is praised for choosing imperialism over its neighbors rather than waiting, as did Sparta, for the particular necessity to acquire each neighbor that might arise piecemeal (D 1.6.4). But there is a complication that seems to confound the supremacy of necessity over morality. Ordinary human beings do not agree to it; they believe that moral choices are possible without regard to necessity. This is a delusion from which they cannot be saved. So a prince, or anyone imitating a prince, cannot simply announce that he does what is necessary. To do so would make him seem weak to his subjects, not in charge of events but ruled by them. The prince must give the appearance of acting freely rather than following necessity. By appearing to choose he can gain their admiration or fear of his virtue and their consent or submission to his rule. He can impress them as they hold him to be extraordinary or great. In so acting he can get credit for free choice when actually – in fact – he is anticipating future necessities in his present choices. He can receive moral praise while violating morality, just as Machiavelli promised would have come to the failed tyrant of Perugia (or more likely, to his adviser).

Effectual truth, then, is not merely a statement of what happens to moral choices despite their moral intent and because of the resistance of chance to man’s natural goodness. It is also a prescription of what can be achieved when one looks to control the chance one has perceived to be in the way of one’s intent. One can anticipate how one’s intent will be “held” by others and use this knowledge to conquer the chance that might prevent it. The fact reveals the value and gives it a compelling motive. Morality remains as what it was originally: the wishful imagining of ordinary people. They have a motive too, which is to believe that morality is possible, a position that they hold not accidentally but of necessity, their necessity. Effectual truth does not seek to abolish morality; on the contrary, it needs morality. It needs something to shock in those not strong enough in mind or spirit to live without the assurance that one can afford to be moral. Realizing this, the prince, or anyone who can live without morality, discovers his own necessity to take advantage of those whose necessity makes them too weak to succeed. Necessity works to manage the necessity of the weak in order to obey the knowing prince’s necessity.

The knowing prince knows the art of war enabling him to win over those who lack it, and if he lacks it, he will lose to the knowers (P 14). The Socratic formula of virtue = knowledge is vindicated by Machiavelli, with a different knowledge and correspondingly different virtue. One’s necessity is one’s own necessity, not another’s; the other’s necessity, whether that of weakness or of virtue, is in fact against yours. Necessity tells you that you must make others dependent, and feel their dependence, on you. To be independent is not to be
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isolated, “living unnoticed” like the Epicurean philosopher. As a capable person, “a man notable for his quality,” you will be noticed and suspected. You can then “play crazy” (fare il pazzo) like Brutus but with the ultimate aim of making others play crazy to you (D 3.2). Necessity is a common principle that divides men from one another, for ultimately it is always my necessity against yours. A common predicament may join us together for a while, but sooner or later one of us, and thus both of us, will have to choose against the other. Necessity leads to one end, which is the tyranny of “one alone,” uno solo. This was what made Romulus kill his brother Remus, if with the pretext, later dropped, of wishing “to help the common good and not himself.” Necessity leads one to the tyranny of oneself; that is what is necessary. Tyranny is the effectual truth of the desire to control necessity through necessity.

The greatest tyranny is in opinion, because it is above one’s fatherland. Machiavelli said in a letter that he loved his patria more than his own soul. Would that be Italy or Florence? The answer is neither. In his impartial advice he could sacrifice Florence to Italy, as in his exhortation at the end of The Prince, and give over Italy to a foreign invader, the king of France, whom he advises on how to succeed the next time earlier in that work (P 3). His patria could be the “sect” or religion of a prophet whose prophetic opinions may extend beyond the confines of a country or nation (D 2.5.1; 3.1.4). But Machiavelli’s ambition is to address all humanity, more precisely “the common good of each” rather than any particular fatherland. Machiavelli himself is a tyrant because his notion of necessity, which he was the first to see, has been imposed on all thinkers and, through them, on nonthinkers as well. His enterprise is the making of the modern world, which can be defined as a more or less concerted attempt at the rational control of chance for the advantage of mankind.

That modernity, defined so broadly, could be the work of a single individual will be shocking to many today. We have become accustomed to the view that large, impersonal forces too powerful to be resisted and too grand to be the work of an individual rule our lives in successive waves that we as societies or cultures can hardly predict, let alone control. Our lives seem to be under the very contrary of rational control, let alone that of a single individual. People today know the name of Machiavelli in the word “Machiavellianism,” an epithet for whatever they find dishonorable or despicable. Nonetheless – nondimango, a favorite Machiavellian counter to what one expects – there is reason to entertain the notion. For he had an example before him that should give pause to our skepticism about the power of an individual to convey a message to the world. Machiavelli, realist as he was, made a point of the greater power of arms over the influence of words, and he asserted insistently that all unarmed prophets are bound to fail (P 6; cf. D 1.12.2; 3.30.1). Still, readers of Machiavelli learn or may be advised to learn that when he becomes insistent

8 See Roecklein, Machiavelli and Epicureanism, ch. 4.
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of some point, one should be suspicious and question what he seems so sure of. Sure enough, it is easy to think of an obvious example of a successful unarmed prophet that was of supreme interest to him: Jesus Christ. This prophet is also an individual who changed the world and determined its course for centuries until today. What Machiavelli had before him was the thought, not that one individual would find it impossible to control the world, but that any such individual might learn how to accomplish that amazing feat from the example of the one individual who had already done it. Let this thought serve also as an initial response to the skepticism, quite understandable, that there could have been one person in charge of the fashioning of modernity.

What Machiavelli borrowed from the example before him was how to conquer not with arms, or “open arms,” as did Moses and Mohammed, but with concealed arms or “fraud” or propaganda (D 2.13.1; 3.40.1). Specifically, fraud “is always necessary for those who wish to climb from small beginnings to sublime ranks” – an allowance that includes himself (D 2.13.2). In his case there was to be a philosophic revolution rather than conversion to revealed truth, but it was philosophy with a new profession, appealing to the young and the youthful in spirit with a force and zeal similar to that of Christianity but against it. This revolution took Christian revolution through conversion as its model as well as its enemy, and it took heart from the belief that Christianity was now in its corrupted dotage with its original spirit lost, and able to be opposed openly by someone with sufficient boldness (D 2.5.1; 3.1.1, 4). Machiavelli had the same belief as his contemporary Martin Luther, who undertook a reformation from within rather than a revolution from outside – and was another very powerful individual who made an age rather than being made by one. One does not need to attribute superhuman power to Machiavelli to see him as the founder and cause of a project based on the *cose moderne* that he claims long experience with (P Let. Ded.).

That Machiavelli had in view something so comprehensive and disputed as the modern world can be approached from the not unusual opinion that he stood for, even initiated, “realism,” in chapter 15 of *The Prince*. Realism could be identified as doing what ensures worldly success, and Machiavelli claimed to have been concerned with “worldly things” from “a long practice and continual reading” (D Let. Ded.) To establish this claim he occupied himself with defining “the world” as the realm of necessities, as is shown in his demand

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9 On so everyday a matter as to how dates are calculated NM has a say, or a hint, in the fact that the twenty-six dates in the *Discourses* are all in his lifetime, as are the two in *The Prince*. What could this possibly mean? The secularization of our time has converted BC to BCE and AD to CE, where c means “common” rather than Christian. This is Christianity covered up rather than replaced. To do its job, the “common era” needs a replacement date of greater importance than the birth of Christ to restart the numbering. NM is ready to oblige.


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for self-importance, and signified it by never referring to “this world” or “the next world” in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* (which are the only two works in which he says at their beginning that they contain everything he knows\(^\text{11}\)). The “world” had to be reclaimed from the distinction made by Christianity, so that “this world” becomes *the* world, the only world, and not subordinate to another world. He says that the ancient pagans, the Gentiles, esteemed “the honor of the world” as the Christians do not – avoiding a perfect occasion on which to speak of this world as compared to the next (D 2.2.2). Of the two religions, the pagans do better to recognize the honor of the world than does “our religion,” which yet has “shown the truth and the true way.” With this advantage, how could Christianity fail in so vital a respect as understanding the status of the world? In regard to the world the pagans show the truth and the true way more than “our religion,” which, because it is ours, makes it necessary to say it is true. But actually he doesn’t say that it is true. As will be seen, it is possible to *show* the truth and the true way without *being* the truth and the true way. For one example, already mentioned, Christianity shows the strength and perhaps also the means of winning consent through propaganda. The very Church, composed of clerics who Machiavelli asserts “do not believe” in the punishment of God, may well be the vehicle for bringing the relief of truth to the Christian belief in their truth (D 3.1.4).\(^\text{12}\) Machiavelli performed the work of realism that realists today shirk and leave to him, of wrestling realism from the ascendancy of theology.

Moreover, there is a new character to Machiavelli’s realism. Those who speak of realism commonly distinguish it from idealism; they separate Kant the idealist from Machiavelli the realist. But Kant and Machiavelli, though opposed in their attitude to morality, for or against, agree in their definitions of the world, where Kant accepts the truth of Machiavellian necessity, and they agree in their desire to change the world. Kant, be it noted, *finds* the necessary progress of humanity in the conflicts of the very “asocial sociality” that defines the world of Machiavelli.\(^\text{13}\) Machiavelli’s realism is not the kind that finds it realistic to accept things as they are and to watch the world from the security of the shore as ships crash on the rocks, like Lucretius. He says in this considerable paragraph we are studying that the Ought should be based on the Is, meaning necessity, not on the imagined utopias that presently confuse and delude the world. “According to necessity” is the true standard of morality just as for Kant it is the rational necessity of pure practical reason. Kant’s

\(^{11}\) A signature observation of Leo Strauss (*Thoughts on Machiavelli* (hereafter *Thoughts*), 17), setting these works of Machiavelli above all his others, and here excluding that Machiavelli would have treated the next world more authoritatively elsewhere rather than in them.

\(^{12}\) That is why Strauss said that Marsilius of Padua, who attacks the clergy, suffered from “anti-clericalism,” while by contrast Machiavelli, who wanted to enlist the clergy in his enterprise, showed “anti-theological ire.” Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 44; *History of Political Philosophy*, 294; Marsilius of Padua, *Defender of the Peace*, 1.5.10–13, 6.

\(^{13}\) Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, 4th Thesis.
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idealism comes with the support of historical necessities, and Machiavelli’s realism, antecedent to it, has a grand project to accomplish. Indeed, the word Machiavelli uses for his enterprise, l’impresa, is comparable in Kant’s philosophy to the “spontaneity” of the understanding into the world. What is for Machiavelli the prudent work of the prince is the activity of reason in Kant. Machiavelli’s successors do not exactly agree with him, nor do they entirely depart from him as some of them pretend. Strange but true, the word “effectual” made its way into the King James version of the Bible in 1611, about a century later.

It is not only that Machiavelli combines realism with its apparent opposite, idealism. He likes in general to present things of the world as “binary,” in today’s language, either this or that, never moderate or in the middle. His version of virtue shows, however, that it is effectual only when it is contrasted with vice, for example liberality with stinginess or mercy with cruelty. You appreciate a virtue only when you have suffered an experience of its corresponding vice. For Machiavelli, the moderation of “the middle way” is a mixture of the extremes, not avoidance of them. The advantage of binary distinctions is not that they clearly reject what is not but that they combine opposites while keeping them. Thus the world is not necessary rather than imaginary, but the necessity in it comes to view and becomes effectual when it is contrasted with the imaginary. Necessity as the standard does not abolish morality, for morality, as we have seen, is necessary to those inclined to be moral. Necessity does not abolish the need for prudence by offering a single standard that makes everything in the world plain to all. Necessity is commonly concealed by high-sounding words appealing to morality whose authority Machiavelli must work to expose. Future necessity is surely more obscure than present necessity. It has to be anticipated, and since it is not yet arrived, it must be imagined. So perception of necessity, like that of the good, requires the use of imagination, though disciplined by fear and advantage in this world. Necessity, then, is not simply opposed to imagination.

The binary, apparently ruling, distinction in Machiavelli between principalities and republics is also not perfect. Princes are necessary to republics and can be found there, and principalities can be maintained best by becoming republics, no longer dependent on the chance prudence of a single prince. The distinction between the two “humors” of those who like to command and those who do not like to be commanded, found in both The Prince and the Discourses, and apparently binary (P 9; D 1.4.1; FH 2.12, 3.1), is not complete. Machiavelli claims to be working for “the common good of each” or everyone

\[15\] Kant, Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent, 6th to 9th Theses.

\[16\] Machiavelli’s uno solo appears in Kant as the individual rational being who legislates universal laws of reason for all fellow rational beings in the categorical imperative. Its rationality raises it above tyranny despite its power to command although we cannot know this for sure in any instance.