

Machiavelli's Effectual Truth

Machiavelli is said to be a Renaissance thinker, yet in a notable phrase he invented, “the effectual truth,” he attacked the high-sounding humanism typical of the Renaissance, while mounting a conspiracy against the classical and Christian ideas of his time. In *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth* this overlooked phrase is studied and explained for the first time. The upshot of “effectual truth” for any individual is to not depend on anyone or anything outside yourself to keep you free and secure. Mansfield argues that this phrase reveals Machiavelli's approach to modern science, with its focus on the efficient cause and concern for fact. He inquires into the effect Machiavelli expected from his own writings, and the belief that his philosophy would have an effect that future philosophers could not ignore. His plan, according to Mansfield, was through his successors to create his own future and ours in the modern world.

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Machiavelli's Effectual Truth

Creating the Modern World

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For Anna

But since my intent is to write something useful for whoever wishes to understand it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it.

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 15

For it is seen that two virtuous princes in succession are sufficient to acquire the world, as were Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great. A republic should do so much more, as through the mode of electing it has not only two in succession but infinite most virtuous princes who are successors to one another. That virtuous succession will always exist in every well-ordered republic.

Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 1.20

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Preface

The theme of this book is the notion of “effectual truth” that Machiavelli discovered and declared in *The Prince*. This notion refers generally to the way the world reacts when it meets a claim to truth, to its effect, the “takeaway” as we say today, rather than its accuracy or consistency. Particularly, I am concerned with the reception that Machiavelli can expect for his own doctrine, a new truth that celebrates new truth. More particularly, I want to consider the philosophers whom he expects to convince of his truth, the successors he will employ. My book’s title is ambivalent in a way one might not expect. “Machiavelli’s effectual truth” means not only the notion in that strangely unnoticed phrase but even more to its application to Machiavelli himself. What is the effectual truth of the teacher of effectual truth?

This book can be taken as a companion to an earlier one published in 1996 as *Machiavelli’s Virtue*. In that book his virtue means the virtue he recommends to all and his own virtue that he practices himself. Just as Machiavelli is not merely his own best example in virtue but the one who as prince has taken charge of our virtue as his pupils and subjects, so too he is the one who alone, as *uno solo*, will not only introduce the notion of effectual truth but also himself make that truth effectual to benefit all of us. He is the author of his own effectual truth. He will do this after his death through philosophers who will carry on, or “execute,” his “enterprise” – the two quoted words being key features of his vocabulary. These philosophers, whom he designates “captains” in his *Discourses on Livy*, will be his successors. They are not mere accidents or chance consequences he cannot control beyond his lifetime, but designated thinkers, those who desire to “reason about everything,” who will be convinced to follow in his “path” and continue to develop the “effectual truth” of the world. They are known to us as the philosophers of modernity, as they, following Machiavelli, came to define it: the world understood as effectual truth, complete in itself, confined to what can be seen, heard,

tasted, smelled, or touched by human senses, not requiring any supra-world of Plato's ideas or God's heaven either to explain it or supply its defects.

This book can also be taken as the first study of effectual truth and of its application to Machiavelli himself as its originator. It has two features for which some apology is needed, since it is both incomplete and speculative. It is incomplete because it asserts much more than it proves, and because it is episodic, much of it consisting in articles published previously and now shown to be relevant to the theme of effectual truth and the thesis of philosophic succession. But there is no attempt to explain what all the modern philosophers after Machiavelli, from Bodin to Montesquieu, owe to him for his discovery of the effectual truth and how each of them manages his "commission" in this regard from the founding prince.

In fact, the only post-Machiavellian philosopher studied at some length is the one who maintained that he had in a sense completed the mission received from Machiavelli over two centuries before: Montesquieu. In Chapter 6, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* is examined from beginning to end to reveal its derivation from Machiavelli's effectual truth, its correction of Machiavelli's application of that notion in its advice, and its declaration that Machiavelli's work had been completed. This unpublished chapter builds on the work of several scholars of Montesquieu, who remark on his notable phrase that "one has begun to be cured of Machiavellianism." To understand the cure one must see how it is conveyed, and take note that Montesquieu uses the sort of "fraud" that Machiavelli boasted of to describe and even to announce the cure of "Machiavellianism" he thought was underway. My book shows Montesquieu's esotericism for the first time from a scholarly standpoint, and no doubt imperfectly. Chapter 7 contains a brief study of Machiavelli in Tocqueville's great work, *Democracy in America*, which was also the first to demonstrate Tocqueville's hidden appreciation of Machiavelli's hidden enterprise.

Or is this truly demonstration? The second feature for which the argument of this book needs an apology is its speculative nature. Since an apology is a kind of defense, I will get off my knees to give it. One knows from Plato's *Apology of Socrates* that philosophy is an inherently subversive movement against the established order. Socrates was accused of not holding to the gods held by his city and of corrupting its youth, two forms of rebellion against the official education designed to protect and prolong its regime. To continue their activity in the face of power that will always be strong enough to stop and punish it, philosophers must resort to various means of concealment when they disclose themselves by writing. These means must be hidden from authority but open to other philosophers, whether they are mature or fledglings. This is what Leo Strauss called the "art of writing" contrived by philosophers to oppose and circumvent the danger of persecution, and experienced readers will by now have detected the strong scent of his presence.¹

¹ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952).

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This art of writing is obliged to avoid the straightforward demonstration of evidence and argument expected by scholars today and is characteristic of scientific proof, in which premises, arguments, and conclusions are declared and open to all without possibility of misunderstanding. Scientific demonstration does not admit nuance, subtlety, or irony. Everything is above board and without reserve. The art of writing, however, favors grace, surprise, and deliberate obfuscation. It cannot be “transparent,” a political term of our time that, when invoked, makes a listener suspect a lie. But of course a lie cannot succeed when admitting it’s a lie; so the art of writing has to conceal its artful character to most readers while offering intriguing avenues of subversive investigation to others. Behind the artful character and facilitating of subversive investigation is the assumption that everything written has to be where and what it is. Nothing in the writing is by accident, and no meaning found in it is merely the work of a guess. However strange it must seem to most readers and most writers, the greatest writing illustrates the highest necessity with the very stylish beauties that seem so creatively personal.

Machiavelli said: “For it is enough to ask someone for his arms without saying, ‘I wish to kill you with them,’ since you are able to satisfy your appetite after you have the arms in hand” (D 1.44.2).² This elementary counsel of prudence tells the philosopher to keep his political inferences and intentions under wraps. He cannot make his speech “perfectly clear” (another suspect sign in the speech of a politician). He must make suggestions and use hints, avoiding the fact while sometimes using the language of manly frankness. In this book I address the communication between philosophers across generations, joining centuries of historical change, arguing with those who are dead and explaining to the unborn. Normally, one would expect that philosophers’ addresses to one another would be like messages put in a bottle and thrown in the sea, open to chance and usually never received or if found, misunderstood. But the case is different with Machiavelli. For the philosopher of “effectual truth” wants to make a world governed by that principle, and to do so he must contrive somehow to govern the philosophers who follow him. He will give a start to his enterprise but he needs help to develop and maintain it afterwards.

It is not without reason that Machiavelli likes to insist that the prince maintain what he acquires, for he needs to do this himself. The power he wishes to subvert – the power of Christianity and the Church – needs to be confronted directly and openly criticized in a way it has never been before. This Machiavelli can do but it is all he can do in his lifetime. What sort of regime succeeds from this encounter he can make suggestions for – a republic and/or a principality – but he cannot make specific recommendations for a political situation not yet existing. Moreover, he can conceive of “worldly

² References to *The Prince* are by chapter (e.g., P 1), to the *Discourses on Livy* by book, chapter, and paragraph (e.g., D 1.1.1), and to the *Florentine Histories* by book and chapter (e.g., FH 1.39). Other works by Machiavelli are prefaced with the abbreviation NM.

things” (D Let. Ded.) considered from the standpoint of effectual truth, which excludes any appeal to any sort of “next world” hovering over “this world” and both corrupting politics and casting a cloud over the science that seeks to understand this refashioned world. In his two major works he refers to “science” in only one place, leaving the whole enterprise of modern science to be announced and worked out by “one of the doctors” of England, Francis Bacon.³ Yet Machiavelli wants to ensure that his own effect in the future will be in accord with his principle of effectual truth. He must control what the nature of human mortality would seem to make impossible to control: his own *Fortuna*. What I mean to say is that readers cannot expect a demonstrative proof but must be satisfied with speculation – not unfounded but reasonable speculation, not lacking in evidence but requiring imagination to see, and not certain but probable. What Machiavelli intends and what I say of it is on first encounter implausible, I confess. My effort will be to make it plausible at least and at most give it the kind of moral certainty that scholars like to refuse but often display.

Chapter 1 on Machiavelli’s succession problem lays the foundation for this book. It explains the notion of effectual truth and shows how it leads to the succession problem, as it may be called, a problem for Machiavelli as for no other preceding philosopher. The effectual truth is less than the simple truth but at the same time more. It is less than the high-minded rationality of Plato and Aristotle with their forms or ideas and essences needed to establish the being of things we perceive. But it is also more than this truth because it contains an incentive to receive and practice it; it is truth that has an effect in the world, not depending on the imaginative high reason of the high-minded. Once the unintended consequences of being high-minded are seen as typical, not as chance events aspired to by powerless philosophy, they will appear as intended by the one who first conceived the effectual truth and made it serve his plan of bringing common benefit to each of us (D 1.pr.) – by Machiavelli. His plan requires and includes a succession of followers, for he cannot give effect to all of it in his lifetime. His plan must be worked out – as indeed it has, in good part. This, in brief, is the connection between Machiavelli’s notion of effectual truth and his notion of philosophic succession. It bears restatement from several aspects to make explicit what he conveys guardedly and implicitly, with his characteristic flair and misdirection. His plan is in view for all, for most to see in part and for a very few to see as a whole. My view is but a glimpse, but our situation of late modernity when philosophy is at risk makes it timely.

Chapter 2 was conceived in 2013 at the 500th anniversary of the composing of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. It shows effectual truth from the standpoint of Machiavelli’s enterprise, the goal of which is the common benefit of each or everyone and effectual truth in the notion of necessity, first made political

³ Bacon, *Essays*, 13.

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by Machiavelli as opposed to the Epicurean necessity that counsels a philosophical life aloof from politics. Further, it considers the word “fact,” derived from “effectual” and become everyday speech in which it expresses a speaker’s attempt to impress the listener: “in fact”! For Machiavelli, the most impressive effect is the fact or effect of a sensational execution by the prince, after which everyone walks more fearfully than before. For Hume, his successor, however, the effect is diminished to everyday “matter of fact,” applying to anything impressive or not, and not confined to human deeds. But it is Hobbes who introduces fact as what contrasts to what we merely imagine. One should be impressed by facts, not by wishful imaginings. To counter the folly of wishing, fact cannot just sit there; it needs to draw attention away to itself. The ho-hum anti-drama of fact needs drama of its own, the drama of science that organizes effectual truth and forgets its author.

Chapter 3 considers Leo Strauss’s amazing book *Thoughts on Machiavelli* that, like Machiavelli, “departs from the orders of others” (P 15), with my focus on Strauss’s treatment of *The Prince*. Strauss’s judgment on Machiavelli is admiring but severe: Machiavelli in a biblical view is a fallen angel, and in a classical view has a noble perversity. Strauss adopts these two viewpoints throughout, following Machiavelli, who by interpreting the Bible draws philosophy out of, yet away from, the enemy territory of sacred law. In the *Discourses* Machiavelli uses Livy as his Bible, beginning from acceptance and gradually developing his disagreement. In the political terms of both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, both the classical and the Christian views must answer to the higher authority of “foreign arms” rather than defend itself with “its own arms.” For “arms” signify ideas as well as guns. Yet despite his judgment against Machiavelli most of Strauss’s study seeks to promote him to the highest rank, and to secure the elevation he deserves. Strauss provides an instruction in how to read him that is useful and necessary for the understanding of any great writer. Chapter 4 considers Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*, a play in which a comic prince tries to gain an heir to sustain his family succession by allowing himself to be cuckolded. The serious equivalent to this comedy is Machiavelli himself, hiding in his play and scheming to the result of a successful conspiracy – the effectual truth of his enterprise. Both effectual truth and succession are in the plot of the play.

In Part II my book turns from Machiavelli’s texts to his *Fortuna*, to use his word, which is the Italian for influence or legacy as well as fortune. The main point is that Machiavelli does not leave his fortune to luck, or entirely to luck. The fortune he leaves after himself in his writings is the notion of effectual truth that is *his* notion, not just a new truth for which he might be (but hasn’t been) named and studied.

Chapter 5 is on context and the making of context by historians. The two examples affecting Machiavelli are Civic Humanism, invented by Hans Baron in 1925, and the Renaissance, by another famous historian, Jakob Burckhardt in 1860. Both historians try in the contexts they name to give Machiavelli a

fortune not made by him but for him, and both have been quite successful in persuading other scholars and the public to put Machiavelli in their places rather than his. Civic Humanism is traced by Baron to Leonardo Bruni's eulogy of Florence, composed in 1404, and said to have culminated in Machiavelli. Chapter 5 features an analysis of Bruni's text questioning its match with Machiavelli. Burckhardt's Renaissance centers on Machiavelli, who in fact should be considered a critic of the Renaissance because he disagreed fundamentally with every other notable who is normally assigned to that period. Every human being lives in a context consisting of the prevailing ideas of his time and place, and a few, especially philosophers, can become aware of those ideas and criticize them, usually, because of the worldly weakness of philosophers, in subdued fashion. By placing these few in a context, historians of our time (representing *its* prevailing ideas) reduce critics to spokesmen of the ideas they merely avow for self-protection yet actually question. The leading example of contextual shrouding is the attribution of Christian belief to Humanist and Renaissance thinkers who with good reason dared not avow their doubt of that belief. An example is given in the Appendix of a contextual historian who causes the greatness of Machiavelli to vanish into the commonplaces of his context. But such methodical disparagement is a form of effectual truth: Machiavelli is received as what he represents, not as what he intended. Instead of making his own future fortune, it is made for him. The master conspirator not only remains hidden but disappears as a possibility.

Chapter 6, much the longest, is on Montesquieu's Machiavelli. Montesquieu gives recognition to Machiavelli that previous modern philosophers, especially the liberal ones like himself, had denied him – but having done so, he can criticize him openly. He calls Machiavelli “that great man” and a legislator, and more: he tacitly accepts him as the founder of modern philosophy. He adopts the principle of effectual truth and uses it first to praise, then to destroy the ancients, and then to establish modernity as if it had no founding philosopher. Or it had no other founding philosopher than himself, only an historical development he discerns. His grand work *The Spirit of the Laws* shows the notion of historical context at its origin and as part of Machiavelli's plan to make liberty secure (more than glorious) in this world, now *the* world. Chapter 7 was co-authored with my late wife Delba Winthrop, not written together but by my addition to her unpublished paper. It reveals Tocqueville's understanding of Machiavelli's enterprise to be as it is reported in this book, a satisfying confirmation of Machiavelli's hints and hidden design with his own. Yet he, in full appreciation of Machiavelli's campaign, announces his own, as captain of his own army, to oppose Machiavelli's. This shorter chapter tops off Machiavelli's fortune as having provoked an impressive critic.

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