

## **“Everyone Sees How You Appear; Few Touch What You Are”:**

### **Machiavelli on Human Nature**

How do the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli appear to us today? There is no small risk that, whenever we crack the spines of *The Prince* or the *Discourses on Livy*, we will find these books to be boring. Full of historical details, full of admittedly colorful and even shocking anecdotes, they nonetheless appear to teach us only what we already know: the maxims of amoral, or immoral, prudence, that ‘the end justifies the means,’ or that ‘might makes right.’ To say that we already know such things does not mean that we believe them, of course. Perhaps in extreme circumstances, with lives at stake, we might grant that it is necessary to be Machiavellian; but who really expects to find himself in extreme circumstances? Most of the time, among family, friends, and fellow citizens, we try to be good, to do what is right. We might grant, while smothering a yawn, that we sometimes need to *be* Machiavellians. But we would not say that we *are* Machiavellians.

And yet Machiavelli’s books are not just full of striking maxims about how we should live, like “men should either be caressed or eliminated” [*P* 3:10].<sup>1</sup> They are also full of striking claims about how we do live, claims that Machiavelli offers in support of these maxims. “[M]en should either be caressed or eliminated, because they avenge themselves for slight offenses but cannot do so for grave ones” [*P* 3:10] – because, that is, only death can stop a human being from seeking revenge, even for a slight injury. Behind or beneath the Machiavellian maxims about how we should live, there appears to be a Machiavellian account of how we do live – an account of what human beings are, an account of human nature. Could this account be true? And if we find it to be so, are we compelled to be, not just rainy day Machiavellians, but Machiavellians

through and through? These questions, it seems to me, run a lesser risk of being boring.

Tonight I will sketch this Machiavellian account of human nature, chiefly as it is found in *The Prince*, but with some reference to the *Discourses on Livy*. In concentrating on these two books, I will be following Machiavelli's advice, at least to some extent. In the Dedicatory Letter of *The Prince*, he suggests that it contains all that he has learned and understood; while in the Dedicatory Letter of the *Discourses* he writes that it contains as much as he knows and has learned [*P* DL:3-4; *D* DL:3; compare *TM*, 17]. Either book on its own would presumably suffice for the experienced student of Machiavelli. But for relative beginners like ourselves, it is helpful to have the same matter given two different forms. What I hope to show by this sketch is that we underestimate Machiavelli if we consider him simply as a teacher of amoral or immoral practices that we can take or leave as we conduct our lives. To the extent that Machiavelli's account of human nature is shared by his successors, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau – to whose thought we trace our political institutions and our understanding of ourselves – we may be forced to acknowledge his account of human nature as our own. It may turn out that deep down, where it counts, we are Machiavellians, even though we do not appear to be so, even to ourselves.

This lecture will have three parts. In the first, I will offer the desire to acquire as the main element of human nature as Machiavelli depicts it, and show how in a political setting this desire ramifies into two humors, that of the great and that of the people. In the second I will sketch goodness as the excellence of the popular humor and virtue as the excellence of the humor of the great, and I will connect Machiavelli's distinction between goodness and virtue to the famous 'turn' in Chapter Fifteen of *The Prince* from the imagination of a thing to its effectual truth [*P* 15:51]. In the final part I will suggest that Machiavelli's view of human nature points to

a science of human nature without a distinctively human element – what Machiavelli calls a “science of sites” – and I will raise some difficulties with this science, difficulties that originate in Machiavelli’s own writings.

## I

Readers who leaf through the pages of *The Prince* or the *Discourses* in search of the phrase ‘human nature’ are bound, at first, to be disappointed. As far as I can tell, Machiavelli never uses the phrase in either work. Mentions of nature, by contrast, are easy to find. In *The Prince*, for example, Machiavelli writes of the natures of nonliving things, like sites, mountains, low places, rivers, and marshes [*P* DL:4, 14:59]. He writes of the natures of living things, like beasts, foxes, and lions [*P* 18:69, 70; 19:78]. He writes of the natures of particular human beings, alone or in groups, like peoples, governments, ministers, emperors, princes, and cautious men [*P* DL:4; 6:24; 4:18; 7:30; 17:68; 19:76; 23:95; 25:99, 100]. He even writes of nature in general as something that contains things [*P* 7:26], and that causes particular men to incline in a certain way [*P* 25:100].<sup>2</sup> But each time he writes about nature, Machiavelli sidesteps the phrase ‘human nature.’ He is willing to write as if particular beings *have* natures, he is willing to include particular *human* beings among these beings, and he is willing to imply that *all* beings fall within nature in some general sense; but nature in each of these cases is subhuman or superhuman – that is, not specifically human. The closest Machiavelli comes to writing about human nature in *The Prince* is a single claim he makes about the “nature of men” – that they are “obligated as much by benefits they give as by benefits they receive” [*P* 10:44]. Even there, he does not dignify the nature of men with the specific adjective ‘human.’

Nonetheless, there are plenty of hints in *The Prince* that Machiavelli thinks that human

beings do have a nature, if only in the sense of an abiding character. Early in the work, for example, he considers “a natural difficulty” and “another natural and ordinary necessity” that confront a new prince: that “men willingly change their masters in the belief that they will fare better,” but that “one must always offend those over whom he becomes a new prince” [*P* 3:8].<sup>3</sup> In the immediate sequel Machiavelli treats these natural necessities that follow from the character of men as “universal causes” [*P* 3:9],<sup>4</sup> and suggests that they contribute to an apparently permanent “order of things” [*P* 3:11] that endures despite the changes brought by time [*P* 3:13; 10:44].<sup>5</sup> Later in *The Prince* he invokes “human conditions” in much the same way, to explain why a prince cannot have, nor wholly observe, all of the qualities that are held good [*P* 15:62]. The conditions in question can be summarized in a single phrase: men are wicked unless necessity makes them good.<sup>6</sup> As with the other natural necessities felt by a new prince, Machiavelli implies that these conditions will never change, as long as there are human beings. If they did change, his description of the situation of the new prince, and of the political situation more generally, would cease to be true.

Similar claims about the abiding character of human beings can be found in the *Discourses*, in a somewhat more explicit form. In that work Machiavelli warns early on against the error of thinking that men, among other things, have “varied in motion, order, and power from what they were in antiquity” [*D* I.P.2:6]. To the contrary, “[w]hoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been” [*D* I.39.1:83].<sup>7</sup> Not just human beings but human things have a permanent character: they “are always in motion, either they ascend or they descend” [*D* II.P.2:123]. Perhaps as a result, the world has a permanent character too: “I judge the world always to have been in the same mode,” Machiavelli writes, “and there to have been as

much good as wicked in it” [D II.P.2:124]. He even flirts, indirectly, with the idea that the world is eternal. “To those philosophers who would have it that the world is eternal,” he writes, “I believe that one could reply that if so much antiquity were true it would be reasonable that there be memory of more than five thousand years – if it were not seen how the memories of times are eliminated by diverse causes, of which part come from men, part from heaven” [D II.5.1:138-139]. It is reasonable, then, that there be no memory of more than five thousand years, even if the world is eternal. So is the world eternal? However this may be, Machiavelli regards the world as lasting enough that he can claim that human things have an abiding character. “It has always been, and will always be,” he announces, “that great and rare men are neglected in a republic in peaceful times” [D III.16.1:254]. Men “have and always had the same passions, and they must of necessity result in the same effect” [D III.43.1:302]. If it were to turn out that the abiding character of human beings included an element specific to human beings, an element that was a cause or principle of human motion and rest, then despite his avoidance of the term, Machiavelli could be said to have an account of a specifically human nature.

The best candidate for such an element, in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, is the desire to acquire. In *The Prince* this desire sets the tone for the whole book. Machiavelli mentions it in the first sentence of the Dedicatory Letter, writing “[i]t is customary most of the time for those who desire to acquire favor with a Prince to come to meet him with things that they care most for among their own or with things that they see please him most” [P DL:3]. In the particular form of the desire to acquire a principality, this desire dictates the concerns of the first half of the work, and is mentioned in three of the first fourteen chapter titles;<sup>8</sup> while the second half, which examines “what the modes and government of a prince should be with subjects and with friends” [P 15:61], can be understood as containing advice about how to keep an acquisition. But when

Machiavelli formulates this desire as a principle, he writes, “truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire” [*P* 3:14], without saying for whom, or for what, this is very natural and ordinary. He does continue, in the immediate sequel, “and when men do it who can, they will be praised or not blamed; but when they cannot, and want to do it anyway, here lie the error and the blame” [*P* 3:14-15], but this amounts to saying that praise and blame are specifically human, not that the desire to acquire is.<sup>9</sup> In the *Discourses* Machiavelli elaborates: “nature has created men so that they are able to desire everything and are unable to attain everything” [*D* I.37.1:78]. As a result, “human appetites are insatiable, for since from nature they have the ability and the wish to desire all things and from fortune the ability to achieve few of them, there continually results from this a discontent in human minds and a disgust with the things they possess” [*D* II.P.3:125]. While Machiavelli says that the insatiable appetites and the discontent and disgust that they produce are specifically human, they are also effects of a cause that is not specifically human: nature in general.

Not only does Machiavelli fail to insist that the desire to acquire is specifically human; he also fails to assign the desire a specific end. In *The Prince* and the *Discourses* he depicts human beings who desire to acquire material things like cities and provinces, states and kingdoms, friends and partisans, and spiritual things like reputation, glory, and knowledge. But he never argues that these are the proper objects of the desire to acquire. Instead, he asserts in the *Discourses*, “each willingly multiplies that thing and seeks to acquire those goods he believes he can enjoy once acquired” [*D* II.2.3:132; compare II.4.2:137]. The desire to acquire can have anything as its object, then, so long as the one who acquires it *believes* he will enjoy it. But the omnivorousness of the desire points again to its insatiability. Since the object of the desire is nothing in particular, but rather acquisition for the sake of enjoying possession, and since

possession inspires only disgust and discontentment, the acquiring being goes from expecting future enjoyment to feeling present dissatisfaction, and the desire to acquire must seek a new object. Machiavelli is right, then, to call this desire a desire to acquire, since it aims at no object in particular, but rather at acquisition, which is to say the feeling of acquisition, in general. Human beings feel discontent and disgust with what they have; they enjoy only when they feel that what they have is increasing.<sup>10</sup> The desire to acquire thus resembles a drive to grow, since its end is an increase in one's own, without any intrinsic concern about whether one's own is also good.<sup>11</sup>

Understood in this way, the desire to acquire has both external and internal consequences. Externally, this desire drives isolated human beings to acquire without limit and without exclusion – in the *Discourses* Machiavelli mentions that it is even possible to “acquire the world” [*D* I.20.1:54]. It follows from this that isolated human beings are almost entirely formless.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is one reason for Machiavelli's practice of using “matter” as a term for the human beings who are potential subjects of a prince [*P* 6:23; 26:102, 104]. But in a political setting, when human beings live together, their desires to acquire interfere with one another, and form arises. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli proclaims that in every city and every principality, “two diverse humors are found” [*P* 9:39; compare 19:76<sup>13</sup>]: the people and the great. These humors are defined by their characteristic appetites: “the people desire neither to be commanded nor oppressed by the great, and the great desire to command and oppress the people” [*P* 9:39].<sup>14</sup> In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli calls these humors the nobles and the ignobles, and writes, “[w]ithout doubt, if one considers the end of the nobles and of the ignobles, one will see great desire to dominate in the former, and in the latter only desire not to be dominated; and in consequence, a greater will to live free, being less able to hope to usurp it” – that is, to usurp

freedom – “than are the great” [D I.5.2:18].<sup>15</sup>

Lest we think that Machiavelli means that the people or the ignobles do not desire to acquire, and that his two humors are therefore different natures,<sup>16</sup> rather than ramifications of the desire to acquire, Machiavelli points in the *Discourses* to their common source. Having just characterized the difference between the nobles and the ignobles, he restates it paragraphs later as the difference between “those who desire to acquire” and “those who fear to lose what they have acquired,” and then explains that tumults are most frequently generated by those who possess, because “the fear of losing generates in [them] the same wishes that are in those who desire to acquire; for it does not appear to men that they possess securely what a man has unless he acquires something else new” [D I.5.4:19].<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli thereby blurs the difference between the people and the great: fearing to lose has the same effects as desiring to acquire. Later in the *Discourses* he makes much the same point, insisting that the difference between a prince’s and a people’s way of proceeding “arises not from a diverse nature – because it is in one mode in all” [D I.58.3:117], and that the popular desire for freedom is an effect of the desire to acquire [D II.2.1:129].<sup>18</sup> If these assertions are not enough, Machiavelli also tells a characteristic story in the *Discourses* about Clearchus, the tyrant of Heraclea, who, finding himself caught “between the insolence of the aristocrats... and the rage of the people,” “decided to free himself at one stroke from the vexation of the great and to win over the people to himself.” By having all the aristocrats cut to pieces, “he satisfied one of the wishes that peoples have – that is, to be avenged. But as to the other popular desire,” Machiavelli continues, “to recover freedom, since the prince cannot satisfy it, he should examine what causes are those that make [peoples] desire to be free. He will find that a small part of them desires to be free so as to command, but all the others, who are infinite, desire freedom so as to live secure” [D I.16.5:46]. Even if the humor of

the great is eliminated from a city or a principality, the remaining popular humor reforms itself into two humors: the people, and the great.

These Machiavellian indications that the humors of the people and the great are ramifications of the more fundamental desire to acquire also indicate that it is political life that chiefly causes these ramifications. In isolation the desire to acquire knows only the feelings of pleasurable increase or disgusting stasis; the desire to oppress, on the one hand, and the fear of oppression on the other arise only in the political encounter with other more or less powerful desires to acquire. Machiavelli acknowledges this in his brief account of the origins of political life in the *Discourses*. “[S]ince the inhabitants were sparse in the beginning of the world,” he writes, “they lived dispersed for a time like beasts; then, as generations multiplied, they gathered together, and to be able to defend themselves better, they began to look to whoever among them was more robust and of greater heart, and they made him a head, as it were, and obeyed him” [*D* I.2.3:11].<sup>19</sup> Thus arose the universal political struggle between the two humors, in which the great give reputation to one of their number “so that they can satisfy their appetite under his shadow,” while the people give reputation to one of the great “so as to be defended with his authority” [*P* 9:39].<sup>20</sup>

The desire to acquire also has internal consequences: namely, the ramification of the present into the past and the future. Like any desire, the desire to acquire involves opposing a painful, factual present to a pleasant, counterfactual future. A being animated by such a desire must be able to distinguish what it actually possesses from what it might possess, in order to direct itself away from the former and toward the latter. So a being who desires to acquire, in particular, must have memory, a continuing sense of its possessions, and foresight, a sense of what its possessions might become. In the healthy case, its memory will be the basis of its

dissatisfaction with the present, and its foresight, the basis of its hope for the future. As Machiavelli puts it in the *Discourses*, the insatiability of human appetites makes men “blame the present times, praise the past, and desire the future, even if they are not moved to do this by any reasonable cause” [*D* II.P.3:125].

It is the people or the ignobles in particular who blame the present and praise the past, since their knowledge of the past is less accurate than their knowledge of the present, and past things in general are neither feared nor envied [*D* II.P.1:123]. Moreover, memory supports the popular form of the desire to acquire – the fear of loss – by preserving an inaccurate but venerable past, and arguing that excellence consists in this preservation [*D* I.10.2:31]. Memory encourages men to honor the past and obey the present, and thereby discourages conspiracies [*D* III.6.1:218]. And when it involves fearsome events, memory can bring a state back to its beginnings, and so preserve it [*D* III.1.3:211]. Perhaps unsurprisingly, memory is therefore also an obstacle to the great or the nobles’ desire to acquire, especially when acquisition brings innovation [*P* 2:7, 4:19, 5:21]. It is the first concern of new sects to eliminate the memory of their predecessors, for example [*D* II.5.1:139]. But memory can also serve the foresight of the great: if it helps to maintain a nation in the same customs for a long time, it makes it easy for human beings to know future things by past ones [*D* III.43.1:302; compare I.39.1:83-84].<sup>21</sup>

Since the future is on this account the realm of hoped-for acquisition by the great, or feared loss by the people, while the present is the realm of real possession, whether unsatisfying to the great or satisfying to the people, the ramification of the present into the past and the future is also a differentiation between the factual and counterfactual worlds, or between the real and the imaginary. Taken together, the humors of the people and the great and the ramification of the present into the past and the future explain the typical progressivism of the great, who want

to live in the future that their desire to acquire foresees, and the typical conservatism of the people, who want to remain free of this future.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, these forms of the desire to acquire explain why each of Machiavelli's humors has its corresponding understanding of human excellence.

## II

So far we have considered the desire to acquire as the core of human nature, according to Machiavelli. We have also sketched the chief implications of this desire, showing how in political settings it issues in a progressive great and a conservative people. Each of these humors, it turns out, also has a characteristic understanding of human excellence: for the people excellence is goodness, and for the great, excellence is virtue [*D* I.17.1-3:47-48; compare *MV*, 24-25]. We will discover, as we try next to fill in the content of goodness and virtue according to Machiavelli, that the difference between goodness and virtue is also connected to his famous distinction, made in *The Prince*, between the "effectual truth" and "imagined republics and principalities" [*P* 15:61].

Perhaps because of its focus on the perspective of the great, goodness is only mentioned twice in *The Prince*, both times in an ironic and disparaging way. Having begun his consideration of ecclesiastical principalities with the claim that they are maintained without virtue or fortune, Machiavelli concludes with the pious hope that "with his goodness and infinite other virtues" Pope Leo X will make the pontificate "very great and venerable" [*P* 11:47]. In a likeminded remark later in the book, during his survey of the fates of the Roman emperors, Machiavelli notes that Emperor Alexander was of such goodness that he never made use of summary execution. But he was also held to be effeminate, for which he was despised,

conspired against, and assassinated [*P* 19:77]. These examples distinguish goodness from virtue, and can hardly be said to recommend goodness to a prince. In the *Discourses*, by contrast, there is a fuller and less dismissive discussion of goodness. Machiavelli claims that it is the characteristic excellence of peoples, as opposed to princes, writing that if the glories and the disorders of princes be reviewed, “the people will be seen to be by far superior in goodness and glory.” Princes, he explains, are superior to peoples in ordering, but peoples are superior to princes in maintaining the things ordered – which is why they attain the glory of those who order [*D* I.58.3:118]. Despite having characteristically retracted half of his praise of peoples, Machiavelli leaves them with their superiority in goodness.

This excellence consists, then, in maintaining what is ordered at the founding of a sect, a republic, or a kingdom, and promulgated by education [*D* III.1.2:209; III.30.1:280]: namely, the laws, which are maintained by being obeyed by the people. Both peoples and princes show goodness when they obey, and so are restrained by, the laws [*D* I.58.2:116; compare III.24.1:270, III.46.1:307]. Indeed, early in the *Discourses* Machiavelli asserts, “the knowledge of things honest and good” first arose out of the people’s obedience to the great. “[S]eeing that if one individual hurt his benefactor,” he explains,

hatred and compassion among men came from it, and as they blamed the ungrateful and honored those who were grateful, and thought too that those same injuries could be done to them, to escape like evil they were reduced to making laws and ordering punishments for whoever acted against them: hence came the knowledge of justice [*D* I.2.3:11-12].

Now because goodness consists chiefly in obedience to the laws, it is closely connected to religion as the basis of the laws [*D* I.11.3:35; I.55.2:110, 111], and to conscience as their internal enforcement [*D* I.27.1:62; I.55.2:110]. Through obedience to the laws, goodness procures and defends freedom [*D* I.17.1:47], which as we have seen is the goal of the people’s modified desire to acquire. Lest we think that goodness consists solely in obedience to the laws,

Machiavelli mentions one example that “shows how much goodness and how much religion” were in the Roman people. When the Senate issued an unpopular edict that required the plebs to sacrifice to Apollo a tenth of the booty taken in a recent victory, “the plebs thought not of defrauding the edict in any part by giving less than it owed, but of freeing itself from it by showing open indignation” [D I.55.1:110]. Goodness consists chiefly in obedience to the laws, but perhaps more importantly, in the refusal to use fraud even when one disobeys. It is almost the same thing as honesty.

Machiavelli signals, in several places, that the opposite of goodness is corruption [D I.17.1:47; I.55.1:110; III.1.2:209; III.30.1:280]. But there is reason to think that a more thoroughgoing opposite to this excellence of the people is the excellence of the great, virtue. This is not just because, as we have seen, Machiavelli is contemptuous of goodness in his book on princes, nor just because the superiority of princes to peoples in ordering means that they must destroy a prior order that others are trying to maintain. It is not just because virtue is inimical to goodness. Rather, it is because goodness can also be inimical to virtue. We see how so in one of the examples Machiavelli gives to illustrate the goodness of the matter and the orders of Rome: that of Manlius Capitolinus, who found no one to support his rebellion against the Senate and laws, and was condemned by the Roman people to death. “I do not believe that there is an example in this history more apt to show the goodness of all the orders of that republic than this,” Machiavelli concludes, “seeing that no one in that city moved to defend a citizen full of every virtue, who publicly and privately had performed very many praiseworthy works” [D III.8.1:238].<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to his account of goodness, Machiavelli’s account of virtue is developed more fully in *The Prince*, and in particular in the book’s second half, Chapters Fifteen and following,

where he turns to consider “what the modes and government of a prince should be with subjects and with friends” [P 15:61]. This statement of what remains of his project implies that the first half of the book considered what the modes and government of a prince should be with foreigners and with enemies; and when we see that the explicit subject of the first half of *The Prince* is “How Many Are the Kinds of Principalities and in What Modes They Are Acquired” [P 1.T:5] – that is acquisition – this implication is confirmed. We seem to be on a firm Machiavellian footing: with foreigners and enemies the prince follows the desire to acquire, while with subjects and friends he practices virtue. The generality of Machiavelli’s opening statement on virtue might therefore come as a surprise. “A man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good,” he writes. “Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity” [P 15:61]. Necessity, and not the difference between friend and enemy, or subject and foreigner, determines whether the prince should be good or wicked. The “so many who are not good” include friend and foe alike. To be able to act as necessity demands, we will learn, is virtue.

Machiavelli connects his new account of virtue to his famous move from the imagination of a thing to its effectual truth, or from how one should live to how one lives [P 15:61]. Before considering this connection, though, let’s follow his development of this account of virtue in the chapter of *The Prince* devoted to whether a prince should be honest. Since combat with laws – what we might call the combat of the good – is often not enough, one must have recourse to combat with arms: so “it is necessary for a prince to know well how to use the beast and the man” [P 18:69]. The ancients understood this necessity, and communicated it by depicting the centaur Chiron as the teacher of Achilles. “To have as a teacher a half-beast, half-man,”

Machiavelli writes, “means nothing other than that a prince needs to know how to use both natures” [*P* 18:69]. We have mentioned that Machiavelli is willing to say that there is a nature of princes [*P* ED:4]: this nature now seems to be something more comprehensive than the nature of a man or the nature of a beast, if it is capable of using, or imitating [*P* 19:78], both of these natures. “Thus, since a prince is compelled of necessity to know well how to use the beast,” Machiavelli continues, “he should pick the fox and the lion, because the lion does not defend itself from snares and the fox does not defend itself from wolves. So one needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten the wolves” [*P* 18:69]. Each animal, then, has a single defect that is remedied by the other: the fox’s astuteness remedies the lion’s gullibility, while the lion’s fierceness remedies the fox’s contemptibility [compare *P* 19:79].

But if each of the two bestial natures that the prince should use has a single defect that is remedied by the other, what use does the prince have for the other component of the centaur: the nature of a man? Machiavelli has implied that this nature is needed for combat with laws, since this is “proper to man” [*P* 18:69]; but we would be forgiven for doubting him, since he has also claimed, six chapters earlier, that good arms are the necessary and sufficient condition of good laws [*P* 12:48]. We might begin to suspect that combat with arms is also sufficient, and that the prince who knows well how to use the nature of the fox and the lion has no need of the nature of man in addition – that he could be entirely inhuman, all beast. But Machiavelli has more to say. “[I]f all men were good, this teaching would not be good,” – if all men were honest, that is, there would be no snares, and it would suffice for a prince to be a lion – “but because they are wicked and do not observe faith with you, you also do not have to observe it with them” [*P* 18:69]. There are infinite modern examples, he claims, in which “the one who has known best how to use the fox has come out best,” because a faithless prince has ensnared the gullible. “But it is

necessary,” Machiavelli continues, “to know well how to color this nature, and to be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple and so obedient to present necessities that he who deceives will always find someone who will let himself be deceived” [P 18:70]. The nature of the fox needs to be colored because its astuteness is limited to recognizing snares, as opposed to setting them. There is a use for the nature of man after all: it equips an otherwise brutish virtue with the specifically human ability to lie.

In restating his conclusion, Machiavelli makes it clear that his discussion of “In What Mode Faith Should Be Kept by Princes” [P 18.T:68] is really a discussion of his account of all virtue, which is to say a discussion “Of Those Things for Which Men And Especially Princes Are Praised or Blamed” [P 15.T:61], or a discussion of human excellence in general. “[I]t is not necessary,” he writes, “for a prince to have all the above-mentioned qualities [the traditional virtues and vices] in fact, but it is indeed necessary to appear to have them” [P 18:70; compare 15:62]. Lest we infer that it is necessary to have *some* of these qualities, he then sharpens his restatement: since “by having them and always observing them, they are harmful; and by appearing to have them, they are useful,” it is necessary to “remain with a spirit built [*edificato*] so that, if you need not to be those things, you are able and know how to change to the contrary” [P 18:70]. To use a nature, or to imitate a nature, turns out to mean not to have but to appear to have that nature. But to appear to have a nature one does not have is to lie. So the specifically human ability to lie seems sufficient to generate the appearance of, and therefore sufficient to make use of, all the other natures a virtuous prince might need.

This reading is supported by the discussion of Severus in the next chapter of *The Prince*. Since Severus was a new prince whose actions were great and notable, Machiavelli wants “to show briefly how well he knew to use the persons of the fox and the lion, whose natures I say

above are necessary for a prince to imitate” [P 19:78]. These natures are now persons, things that can be impersonated. “[W]hoever examines minutely the actions of this man will find him a very fierce lion and a very astute fox” [P 19:79], Machiavelli continues, again omitting to mention the person or nature of a man. But it turns out that being like Severus is not sufficient for the best kind of prince: “a new prince in a new principality... should take from Severus those parts which are necessary to found his state and from Marcus [Aurelius] those which are fitting and glorious to conserve a state that is already established and firm” [P 19:82]. Since we know from the *Discourses* that those parts are called goodness, we might conclude that this is the use of the nature of a man. But Marcus was an enemy of cruelty [P 19:76], whereas Severus was very cruel [P 19:78], so the new prince who combines their parts will be neither, though he will know how to appear to be both. In other words, the virtuous desire to acquire uses the specifically human ability to lie to impersonate a man, just as much as to impersonate a lion or a fox.

Understood in this way, the nature of the prince is something built, rather than something grown. But this is also true of the nature of peoples. Recall Machiavelli’s practice of referring to the people as “matter” to be formed by the prince [P 6:23; 26:102, 104], and his claims that knowledge of goodness arises from obedient gratitude to the great, and knowledge of justice from laws to protect against ingratitude [D I.2.3:11-12]. If the excellence of the people is goodness, the maintenance of orders founded by the great, then the nature of peoples is something built by the great, just as the nature of the great is something built by the great themselves. The great, we might say, and especially the prince, give form both to their own formless desire to acquire, and to that of the human beings around them. And they are guided in this formation by necessity.

Machiavelli means this foundation on necessity to justify his claim in *The Prince* that by departing from the orders of others in his discussion of virtue and goodness, and focusing on “the effectual truth of the thing” rather than on the imagination of it, he is writing something “useful to whoever understands it” [P 15:61]. Imaginary republics like Plato’s and imaginary principalities like Christ’s, which “have never been seen or known to exist in truth,” are used to illustrate how one *should* live – that is, they are used to support goodness. Real republics and principalities, by contrast, are used by Machiavelli to illustrate how one *does* live. That there is a difference between how one should live and how one does live is a sign of the failure of the imaginary realm to make human beings completely good, and a sign of the need to turn to the real. “Hence it is necessary for a prince,” Machiavelli concludes, “if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity” [P 15:61].

So the virtuous live in the realm of the real, according to Machiavelli, while the good live for the most part in the realm of the imaginary, or the counterfactual. The virtuous live in the present, which exists, while the good live mostly in the future, which does not. What is surprising about this conclusion is that it exactly contraries the conclusion we came to in our analysis of the desire to acquire, which had the humor of the people seeking to maintain present possessions, and the humor of the great hoping for future acquisitions. In other words, each humor of human nature, each way that the desire to acquire expresses itself in a political setting, must need the native realm of the other. The good people need an imaginary future because their desire to acquire, frustrated by the competing desires of the great, is limited in the real world to a hope for maintenance; only in another world, or in a city in speech, can they hope to avenge their subordination and become great. The virtuous great, by contrast, need the present because their

practice of lying – that is, their construction of imaginary worlds – for the sake of future acquisition needs to be informed by present necessities imposed by the people they are lying to; in other words, they require goodness for their virtue to be effectual. The difference between goodness and virtue, we could say, is the difference between an ignorant self-deception and a knowing deception of others.

### III

Having concluded our sketch of Machiavelli's view of human nature, understood as the desire to acquire, with its two humors and their corresponding excellences, we might begin to wonder whether this view is true. This is too big a question to explore in the final part of this lecture, though Machiavelli's view does have the merit of explaining a common moral phenomenon: the concern of those who are trying to be good, that they might be the dupes of those who are not. Instead, this final part is devoted to a narrower, though related, question: does *Machiavelli* think that his account of human nature is true?

Recall that in the fifteenth chapter of *The Prince* Machiavelli claims to turn from the imagination of a thing to its effectual truth, and from how one should live to how one lives [*P* 15:61]. He makes these claims right after announcing his turn to “what the modes and government of a prince *should be* with subjects and with friends” [*P* 15:61], and presumably away from what his modes and government should be with foreigners and with enemies. The first chapter of *The Prince*, by contrast, refers in its title to the modes in which principalities *are* acquired [*P* I.T:5], and so announces the subject of the first part of the work. The suggestion in both parts of *The Prince*, then, is that what human beings should do follows directly from what they in fact do. What human beings in fact do provides the content of necessity, on the basis of

which virtue acts. Moreover, Machiavelli's distinctions between foreigners and subjects, or between foes and friends, vanish from the perspective of necessity. The first part of *The Prince* focuses on acquisition, and so on foreigners and foes, but it treats in the same spirit how acquisitions are maintained, and so mentions subjects and friends [for example, *P* 7:29-30]. Similarly, the second part focuses on how the prince *should* treat subjects and friends, but the virtues that Machiavelli discusses in this part are needed also for dealing with foreigners and foes [for example, *P* 17:67-68]. Perhaps the clearest indication that these divisions vanish from the perspective of necessity is the title of the fifteenth chapter of *The Prince*, "Of Those Things for Which Men and Especially Princes Are Praised or Blamed" [*P* 15.T:61]. Attentive readers will remember that Machiavelli has already, much earlier in the work, said what these things are: "truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire, and when men do it who can, they will be praised or not blamed; but when they cannot, and want to do it anyway, here lie the error and the blame" [*P* 3:14-15]. The difference between the first and the second parts of *The Prince* is the difference between what human beings do to acquire, and what they ought to do. The first part of the work is chiefly descriptive, the second chiefly hortatory; and Machiavelli's exhortation is based on his description: men should learn not to be good – that is, to be virtuous – because men are not good – that is, they are corrupt. In other words, Machiavelli's exhortation to virtue requires two things to be true: that men are corrupt, and that there is a difference between corruption and virtue. Let's look at each of these criteria in turn.

One objection to Machiavelli's claim that men are corrupt is that this may accidentally be so, but it is not so necessarily. As we have seen, human nature, according to Machiavelli, consists of a matter that is not specifically human, the desire to acquire, that can be formed to have specifically human excellences, goodness and virtue. In other words, human nature is

malleable. (Moreover, Machiavelli is evasive about what is specifically human in goodness and virtue: in *The Prince*, as we have seen, he guardedly identifies fraud, which uses or imitates brutish natures, as specifically human; but since fraud merely serves the desire to acquire, it does not serve a specifically human end.) In the *Discourses* Machiavelli makes this malleability more explicit when commenting on Livy's disparaging claim that the French begin battles as more than men, but end them as less than women. "Thinking over whence this arises," he writes, "it is believed by many that their nature is made so, which I believe is true; but because of this it is not that their nature, which makes them ferocious at the beginning, cannot be ordered with art, so that it maintains them ferocious to the last" [*D* III.36.1:292]. To be precise, the nature of the French makes them ferocious at the beginning of battles; it is the failure of this nature that makes their ferocity lapse. This failure can be avoided, and their nature maintained, by the order imparted by art. The Roman army, Machiavelli indicates later in the same chapter, exemplifies such ordering. Nothing its soldiers did was not regulated: "they did not eat, they did not sleep, they did not go whoring, they did not perform any action either military or domestic without the order of the consul" [*D* III.36.2:292]. Not only can the difference between male and female be maintained by art; art can also constrain the natural movements of growth and reproduction. This artful ordering of nature produces the excellences that Machiavelli names goodness and virtue.

But Machiavelli also admits in the *Discourses* that there are limits to what art can achieve with its human material. He mentions two reasons why we are unable to change our natures as necessity demands: "one, that we are unable to oppose that to which nature inclines us; the other, that when one individual has prospered very much with one mode of proceeding, it is not possible to persuade him that he can do well to proceed otherwise" [*D* III.9.3:240]. These

reasons, which correspond to Machiavelli's injunction in *The Prince* that one must both be able to change one's nature, and know how to do so [P 18:70], suggest that the limits to malleability are imposed by the energy and the opinions of each human being.<sup>24</sup> Since there will not always be a human being available with the needed energy and opinions to do what necessity demands in each case – and this is especially so if, as Machiavelli implies, success renders one's opinions inflexible – art will eventually fail to order nature, with a consequent failure of virtue and of the goodness it orders. A permanently good human order, then, is not to be hoped for, despite the malleability of human nature. Corruption is necessary, and so virtue is needed.

The requirement that virtue be different from corruption is trickier to establish. We have seen that both of these forms of human nature are opposed to goodness; they differ because virtue in departing from goodness looks to a different standard, necessity, whereas corruption in departing from goodness does not. The difference between virtue and corruption depends, then, on the existence of knowable necessities in human life. Now we have seen Machiavelli write as though necessities are knowable by human beings; this is what he seems to mean when he urges princes to “learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity” [P 15:61].<sup>25</sup> In other words, Machiavelli seems to think that there is a science of necessities. But in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* taken together, Machiavelli mentions science only twice: both times in a chapter late in the *Discourses* that asserts that a captain must be a knower of sites, or of “the nature of countries” [D III.39.T:297; III.39.2:299]. The argument of this chapter closely parallels that of a similar chapter in *The Prince*, titled “What a Prince Should Do Regarding the Military” [P 14.T:58] – a chapter where, admittedly, science is not mentioned. In these two places, Machiavelli advises that princes, captains, and the great should train in hunting, part of the practical mode of the peaceful exercise of the art of war [P 14:59].<sup>26</sup> Hunting yields

particular knowledge of the country in which one trains. “First,” Machiavelli writes in *The Prince*, “one learns to know one’s own country, and one can better understand its defense; then, through the knowledge of and experience with those sites, one can comprehend with ease every other site that it may be necessary to explore as new” [P 14:59]. Particular knowledge becomes general knowledge, and defensive ability becomes offensive ability, because of a “certain similarity” between the corresponding features in every country, “so that from the knowledge of a site in one province one can easily come to the knowledge of others” [P 14:59].<sup>27</sup> Machiavelli makes sweeping claims for his science of sites. Not only is it necessary for a captain to have this “general and particular knowledge” of “sites and countries” if he wants to work anything well [D III.39.1:297-298], but it will allow a prince to know “all the chances that can occur to an army” [P 14:60]. While Philopoemen, Machiavelli’s example of a possessor of this science, led his army, “there could never arise any unforeseen event for which he did not have the remedy” [P 14:60]. As long as we have the energy to be able to act as necessity demands, the science of sites guarantees that we will know how to do so.

We might grant Machiavelli’s claim that there are no supernatural kingdoms: that because all countries are alike in nature, knowledge of one leads to knowledge of all. But why does he think that a perfected science of sites allows a prince to overcome fortune? A sentence from the *Discourses* is helpful here. “Whoever has this practice,” Machiavelli writes, “knows with one glance of his eye how that plain lies, how that mountain rises, where this valley reaches, and all other things of which he has in the past made a firm science” [D III.39.2.298]. This talk of plains, mountains, and valleys should remind us of the comparison in the Dedicatory Letter of *The Prince*, between the natures of peoples and of princes, on the one hand, and the natures of mountains or high places and of low places, on the other [P DL:4]. By limiting his use of the

word “science” in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* to the science of sites, Machiavelli indicates that there is no science specific to human beings, nor even one specific to living beings. Human nature and living nature are continuous with nonliving nature, and psychology is continuous with geography – or better, with physics. The malleability of human nature, then, is great enough that nonhuman and nonliving phenomena are imitable by human beings, but not so great that human beings become incalculable as a result.<sup>28</sup> Just as there are no superhuman kingdoms, there are no supermen – though as we have seen there are centaurs.

This understanding of Machiavelli’s science of sites is puzzling, though, because it seems to require a descriptive treatment of virtue, rather than the hortatory one that we find in the second part of *The Prince*. If human beings are as determined and predictable as nonhuman bodies, why not describe what they do, rather than fruitlessly exhorting them to behave otherwise than they do? In particular, we would expect Machiavelli to insist that princes *do* learn to be able not to be good, and to use it according to necessity, to the extent that they have the most excellent form of the desire to acquire. Instead, as we have seen, he insists, “it is necessary for a prince, *if* he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity” [*P* 15:61; emphasis added]. Now what sense does this condition, “if he wants to maintain himself,” make in the light of Machiavelli’s claim that all human beings, and the great above all, are driven by the desire to acquire? Since acquisition presupposes the persistence of the acquiring being, how could a prince *not* want to maintain himself?<sup>29</sup>

In the chapter of *The Prince* devoted to conspiracies, Machiavelli admits that there exist very rare human beings with “an obstinate spirit,” who do not care about death. A prince cannot avoid death at the hands of such a conspirator, because “anyone who does not care about death can harm him” [*P* 19:79]. Since the threat of death and the consequent loss of all one’s

acquisitions – the threat of ruin, as Machiavelli puts it – is the paramount necessity faced by human beings [for example, *P* 15:61], these very rare human beings apparently fall outside the scope of this necessity, and therefore outside the scope of the science of sites.<sup>30</sup> There is no remedy available to princes for such unforeseen events. We might expect Machiavelli to try to account for the existence of such human beings by tracing their obstinacy back to the desire to acquire, saying, for example, that they do not care about death because they hope for an afterlife in which they will be rewarded. But he does not do so; instead, he says only that they are motivated by the desire to avenge a “grave injury” [*P* 19:79-80; see also *D* III.6.11:227] – a desire that can be satisfied in this life, even if one does not long survive its satisfaction.

In the *Discourses* Machiavelli claims, “private men enter upon no enterprise more dangerous or more bold” than a conspiracy against a prince [*D* III.6.1:218; see also III.6.4:223]. In *The Prince*, by contrast, he writes, “nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of new orders” [*P* 6:23]. The obstinate spirit one needs to brave the greatest danger in a conspiracy is presumably also needed to brave the greatest danger in founding something entirely new, for every new foundation begins as a conspiracy against the old. We might wonder, then, whether this account of human nature is adequate to explain the activity of the new prince, or even Machiavelli’s own activity. Is Machiavelli himself motivated by the desire to acquire? We cannot seriously believe that a virtuous possessor of the science of sites, for whom, as long as he is armed, no accident can arise for which he does not have the remedy [*P* 14:60], could be compelled to endure a “great and continuous malignity of fortune” [*P* DL:4]. Machiavelli does make it seem, at the beginning of the Dedicatory Letter of *The Prince*, that he desires “to acquire favor with a Prince” [*P* DL:3]; but in the Preface to the first book of the *Discourses* he claims instead that he has

always had a “natural desire... to work, without any respect, for those things I believe will bring common benefit to everyone” [*D I.P.1:5*].

These doubts about Machiavelli’s science of sites – that it ought to preclude the hortatory character of the second part of *The Prince*, and that it cannot account for human beings who are contemptuous of death – suggest that the account of human nature in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* is partial, and that Machiavelli knows it.<sup>31</sup> Through these works he means to shape human nature, to the extent that it can be shaped, by an education that claims that human nature is more malleable and more predictable than Machiavelli really thinks it is. For the sake of the common benefit, he means to persuade the great to act as if they are acting only according to necessity. This project would amount to nothing more than a curiosity in the history of political thought were it not for its remarkable success. We are the indirect beneficiaries of Machiavelli’s questionable attempt: we who believe that our natures are malleable, especially by technology; we who believe in rights founded only on necessities; we who believe ourselves great because of the dream of acquisition without limit; we who believe in progress, and in the necessity of a better future; and we who believe ourselves to be the people whose acquisitions the laws of nature and of nature’s God secure. Without attention to Machiavelli’s account of human nature we run the risk of remaining the unconscious inheritors at third hand of a partial account, of a project, posing as a science, to narrow human possibilities through education. We risk being Machiavellians without knowing it. How is this to the common benefit of everyone?

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20 June 2012

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> References to *The Prince* and to the *Discourses* will be given in the text, in the forms [P Chapter:page] and [D Book.chapter.paragraph:page], respectively. In these references, DL stands for dedicatory letter, P for preface, and T for title. The editions used are Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*. A New Translation with an Introduction, by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), and Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). I also refer to Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the Discourses on Livy*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) in the form [MNMO, page]; to Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) in the form [MV, page]; and to Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) in the form [TM, page].

<sup>2</sup> In the former passage, Machiavelli writes, “states that come to be suddenly, like all other things in nature that are born and grow quickly, cannot have roots and branches” [P 7:26], while in the latter he writes that a man cannot be found who is so prudent to accommodate himself to changes in fortune, in part “because he cannot deviate from what nature inclines him to” [P 25:100]. In two passages in the *Discourses* analogous to the latter passage in *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes that we are unable to change in part because “we are unable to oppose that to which nature inclines us” [D III.9.3:240], and “it is given by nature to men to take sides in any divided thing whatever, and for this to please them more than that” [D III.27.3:275]. In these last three passages we might expect Machiavelli to write “his nature” or “our nature,” but he does not. There is one passage in the *Discourses* where he refers to “the wicked nature of men” [D III.29.1:277], but he makes the reference while quoting a view with which he does not agree.

<sup>3</sup> In nearby chapters at the beginning of *The Prince*, Machiavelli uses the phrases “natural prince” [P 2:7] and “natural affection” [P 4:17] to refer to the prince who inherits a principality and the affection felt for him. The natural and the ordinary are closely connected at this point in the work, and they both refer primarily to the sequence of human generation. The new prince is opposed to the natural or ordinary prince in Machiavelli’s argument, and the natural and ordinary is both an obstacle and an opportunity for him.

<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli may mean to contrast these “universal causes” with the “superior causes” that he mentions in his discussion of ecclesiastical principalities [P 11:45].

<sup>5</sup> “[T]ime sweeps everything before it and can bring with it good as well as evil and evil as well as good” [P 3:13], according to Machiavelli, and “worldly things are so variable that it is next to impossible for one to stand with his armies idle in a siege for a year” [P 10:44]. There is another reference to an “order of things” much later in *The Prince*: “in the order of things it is found that one never seeks to avoid one inconvenience without running into another; but prudence consists in knowing how to recognize the qualities of inconveniences, and in picking the less bad as good” [P 21:91].

<sup>6</sup> “[O]ne can say this generally of men,” Machiavelli writes, “that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain. While you do them good, they are yours, offering you their blood, property, lives, and children... when the need for them is far away; but, when it is close to you, they revolt” [P 17:66]. Having taught his reader later in *The Prince* that a prudent lord cannot observe faith, he continues, “if all men were good, this teaching would not be good; but because they are wicked and do not observe faith with you, you also do not have to observe it with them” [P 18:69]. Indeed, “men will always turn out bad for you unless they have been made good by a necessity” [P 23:95]. Machiavelli’s other claims about the apparently abiding character of men include, “men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because seeing is given to everyone, touching to a few” [P 18:71], and, “men are much more taken by present things than by past ones, and when they find good in the present, they enjoy it and do not seek elsewhere” [P 24:96].

<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli repeats this claim much later in the *Discourses*, in a way that suggests an amendment. “Prudent men are accustomed to say,” he writes, “and not by chance or without merit, that whoever wishes to see what has to be considers what has been; for all worldly things in every time have their own counterpart in ancient times. That arises because these are the work of men, who have and always had the same passions, and they must of necessity result in the same effect” [D III.43.1:302]. What prudent men say by custom rather than by chance, and not without merit, is then corrected by what Machiavelli says in the immediate sequel: that it is *true* that the works of men “are more virtuous now in this province than in that, and in that more than in this, according to the form of education in which those people have taken their mode of life” [D III.43.1:302]. Education can shape nature, such that “Men Who Are Born in One Province Observe *Almost* the Same Nature for All Times” [D III.43.T:302; emphasis added]. Similarly, when investigating “Whence It Arises That One Family in One City Keeps the Same Customs for a Time” [D III.46.T:306], Machiavelli argues that this “cannot arise solely from the bloodline, because that must vary through the diversity of marriages, but it necessarily comes from the diverse education of one family from another” [D III.46.1:306].

<sup>8</sup> “How Many Are the Kinds of Principalities and in What Modes They Are Acquired” [P 1.T:5]; “Of New Principalities That Are Acquired through One’s Own Arms and Virtue” [P 6.T:21]; “Of New Principalities That are Acquired by Others’ Arms and Fortune” [P 7.T:25].

<sup>9</sup> This suggests another reason why Chapter XV, titled “Of Those Things for Which Men And Especially Princes are Praised or Blamed” [P 15.T:61] is also about acquisition.

<sup>10</sup> The desire to acquire thus amounts to a desire for novelty. Later in the *Discourses* Machiavelli writes “men are desirous of new things, so much that most often those who are well off desire newness as much as those who are badly off. For, as was said another time [at D I.37.1:78], and it is true, men get bored with the good and grieve in the ill” [D III.21.2:263].

<sup>11</sup> And just as reproduction is growth by other means, so are one’s offspring and their acquisitions one’s own acquisitions, by other means. Consider Machiavelli’s hints about how Alexander VI used Cesare Borgia [P 11:46]. Death is not simply a limit of the desire to acquire. But compare note 27, below.

Machiavelli does occasionally refer to a good that is the goal of acquisition. For example, in the *Discourses* he writes,

[i]t appears that in the actions of men, as we have discoursed of another time [D I.6.3:21-22, where he wrote of “inconveniences”], besides the other difficulties in wishing to bring a thing to its perfection, one finds that close to the good there is always some evil that arises with that good so easily that it appears impossible to be able to miss the one if one wishes for the other. One sees this in all the things that men work on. So the good is acquired only with difficulty unless you are aided by fortune, so that with its force it conquers this ordinary and natural inconvenience” [D III.37.1:294].

But it is not clear that by “the good” here Machiavelli means anything other than any acquisition that can be felt and so enjoyed.

Also, there are occasional hints in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* that some acquisitions can be harmful to the body that acquires them. In *The Prince* Machiavelli first raises the possibility of such acquisitions when he tells his reader that to keep an acquisition the prince must ensure that the acquired body becomes “one whole body” with the acquiring body [P 3:9]. If the new acquisition instead remains disparate with respect to the prince’s other possessions, then he runs the risk of losing it. A powerful foreigner can easily gain the lesser powers in a disparate province, since the lesser powers, moved by their envy of their rulers, quickly and willingly make “one mass” with the foreign invader [P 3:11]. A prince who rules a disparate state, and who fails to prevent powerful foreigners from taking advantage of this disparity, will soon lose his new acquisition, and “while he holds it, [he] will have infinite difficulties and vexations within it” [P 3:11]. So acquisitions can be harmful to the prince and his state as long as they remain disparate with his other possessions; in general, Machiavelli claims, “the disparity in the subject” explains why some conquerors hold their acquisitions while others lose them [P 4:19]. This disparity can be eliminated, and the new acquisition made into one whole body with the acquiring state, by eliminating the new acquisition’s memory of its previous way of life [P 4:19] – that is, by making the acquisition more complete.

Acquisition in Machiavelli's account thus resembles nutrition, in that the acquired body must become like the acquiring body before it can be good for the acquiring body. As long as an acquisition remains disparate, it remains undigested, and a cause of "difficulties and vexations." But it is not until he considers cities and principalities that live under their own laws before they are acquired that Machiavelli suggests that some acquisitions are by their nature indigestible. Considering the case of a city, he claims at first that "a city used to living free may be held more easily by means of its own citizens than in any other mode, if one wants to preserve it [P 5:20]. But Machiavelli soon admits that this is impossible: "in truth there is no secure mode to possess them other than to ruin them" [P 5:20]. The acquisition of a free city is necessarily harmful: "whoever becomes patron of a city accustomed to living free and does not destroy it, should expect to be destroyed by it" [P 5:20-21]. The indigestibility of such a city results, as we might expect, from the persistence of the memory of its way of life, despite length of time, benefits received, and anything short of destruction [P 5:21]. So the only secure way for a prince to keep such an acquisition is to eliminate it, or to live in it – that is, rather than digesting it, to be digested by it [P 5:21].

This marks the extent of Machiavelli's admission in *The Prince* that some acquisitions are not good for the acquiring body. In the *Discourses* he writes that "[t]he intention of whoever makes war through choice – or, in truth, ambition – is to acquire and maintain the acquisition, and to proceed with it so that it enriches and does not impoverish the country and his fatherland" [D II.6.1:140]. Machiavelli thereby admits that there can be acquisitions that are not good. A later chapter title, "That Acquisition by Republics That Are Not Well Ordered and That Do Not Proceed According to Roman Virtue Are for Their Ruin, Not Their Exaltation" [D II.19.T:172], suggests that virtue might be the necessary and sufficient condition that makes acquisitions good, though Machiavelli ends the chapter by suggesting that "acquiring was about to be pernicious for the Romans in the times when they proceeded with so much prudence and so much virtue" [D II.19.2:175]. His most general remark about the goodness of acquisition in the *Discourses* comes in a chapter whose title proclaims its concern in part with the causes that eliminate the memories of things, where Machiavelli asserts in passing that "in simple bodies, when very much superfluous matter has gathered together there, nature many times moves by itself and produces a purge that is the health of that body" [D II.5.2:140]. But this remark about the goodness of acquisition, like the analogous discussion in *The Prince*, reduces goodness to similarity to the acquiring body: that is, it reduces the good to what is one's own. It does not point to the an account in terms of a good that is independent of one's own.

<sup>12</sup> Almost, because the presence of other competing desires to acquire is likely not the only source of formative effects on the desire to acquire. To the extent that circumstances resist acquisition – one is not strong enough, for example, to climb the tree to reach the desired apple – the desire to acquire is also given form. But these formative effects are presumably not as lasting as political ones. If they were, then our common experience of infantile weakness would yield in everyone the humor of the people.

<sup>13</sup> Here Machiavelli writes, "in other principalities" than the Roman empire, "one has to contend only with the ambition of the great and the insolence of the people" [P 19:76]. In the Roman empire one had to contend as well with the cruelty and avarice of the soldiers.

<sup>14</sup> Later in the same chapter Machiavelli will reformulate this distinction, writing, "the great want to oppress and the people want not to be oppressed" [P 9:39]. The disappearance of command from his formulation calls for an explanation, and Machiavelli provides one in the sequel when he claims, "when a prince who founds on the people knows how to command," among other things, "he will see he has laid his foundations well" [P 9:41], since "citizens and subjects" can become "accustomed to receive commands" [P 9:42]. Where oppression is concerned, the great and the people have nothing in common; but they do have something in common where command that is not oppressive is concerned. Command is thus the closest thing to a political solution to the existence of two humors.

<sup>15</sup> One difference between the perspectives of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* is signaled by Machiavelli's different description of the desires of the two humors in the two works. 'Command and oppress' in *The Prince* becomes 'dominate' in the *Discourses*. In the former work Machiavelli distinguishes between kinds of domination; in the latter he does not.

<sup>16</sup> Mansfield writes that according to Machiavelli, morality

is controlled by natural temperament, by the two humors that divide all mankind and underlie all moral behavior and opinion. By speaking of *humors* Machiavelli indicates that they are not habits of the mind nor mental in origin but prerational dispositions. Not being rational in nature, they cannot be reconciled by speech or argument. These are two human types who do not understand each other – the one preferring security and comfort, suspicious of anyone who desires more, the other seeking risk and demanding honor, unbelieving that anyone could be satisfied with less [MV, 24].

<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli's sudden shift from the plural to the singular in the course of this passage is both striking and puzzling. Could he mean to imply that men can be made to feel secure in their possession if only one man among them – their prince, for example, who in a sense has what they have – acquires something new?

<sup>18</sup> “It is an easy thing to know whence arises among peoples this affection for a free way of life for it is seen through experience that cities have never expanded either in dominion or in riches if they have not been in freedom” [D II.2.1:129]. Moreover, if a republic “will not molest others, it will be molested, and from being molested will arise the wish and the necessity to acquire” [D II.19.1:173]. The desire to acquire is also an effect of the desire for freedom.

<sup>19</sup> There is a similar but less detailed account in the previous and first chapter of the *Discourses*. Since all cities are either founded by natives or by foreigners, and all foreigners were natives elsewhere, then the original foundation of cities

occurs when it does not appear, to inhabitants dispersed in many small parts, that they live securely, since each part by itself, both because of the site and because of the small number, cannot resist the thrust of whoever assaults it; and when the enemy comes, they do not have time to unite for their defense. Or if they did, they would be required to leave many of their strongholds abandoned; and so they would come at once to be the prey of their enemies. So to flee these dangers, moved either by themselves or by someone among them of greater authority, they are restrained to inhabit together a place elected by them, more advantageous to live in and easier to defend [D I.1.1:7].

<sup>20</sup> That the command of one of the great produces a political struggle between the two humors indicates that this command is not a perfect solution to the existence of the two humors. This is partly because the great continue to desire to acquire by oppressing the people. But it is also because the satisfaction of the people's desire to be free of oppression cannot amount to a satisfaction of their more fundamental desire to acquire. Even a free people is compelled to recognize the superiority of the great, whose fundamental desire they share, and to see this superiority as an obstacle to the satisfaction of their desire to acquire. The result is envy: the desire that the great be deprived of their superiority. Machiavelli acknowledges this difficulty early in *The Prince*, when he considers the challenges a prince faces in holding a recently-acquired province that is disparate from those he already holds. “[T]he order of things is such that as soon as a powerful foreigner enters a province, all those in it who are less powerful adhere to him, moved by the envy they have against whoever has held power over them” [P 3:11]. Even or especially founders face envy [P 6:25], though Machiavelli conceals this difficulty in his concluding exhortation of a prince to seize Italy and free her from the barbarians [P 26:105]. Since envy persists among the people even when they are free from oppression by the great, and arises among the great when they elevate one of their number to command the people, Machiavelli distinguishes envy from fear [P 7:31; D II.P.1:123] and elevates it to a characteristic of human beings in the *Discourses*. “[T]he envious nature of men,” he writes there, “has always made it no less dangerous to find new modes and orders than to seek unknown waters and lands, because men are more ready to blame than to praise the actions of others” [D I.P.1:15]. The political solution to the existence of the two humors is not just command, but hidden command.

<sup>21</sup> According to Machiavelli, there may be airborne intelligences, by contrast, who foresee future things by “natural virtue” [D I.56.1:114].

<sup>22</sup> This is not to deny that the people, and especially an oppressed people, might long for a future in which they are free from oppression. But such a future would require that the great be deprived of their superiority. The people are

typically conservative as long as they cannot imagine a satisfaction for their envy. In a chapter titled “The Multitude is Wiser and More Constant than a Prince,” Machiavelli admits that under a corrupt prince the people fear the present more than the future, while under a corrupt people they fear the future more than the present, because in the future a tyrant might emerge [*D* I.58.4:119]. But the corrupt case is not the typical one. Similarly, circumstances might require the great to fear the loss of their acquisitions, rather than to desire further acquisitions – for example, when threatened by a superior desire to acquire. But this is also an atypical case for the great.

<sup>23</sup> Manlius’ fate points to another of Machiavelli’s remarks about goodness. Later in the *Discourses*, in a chapter partly titled “For One Citizen Who Wishes to Do Any Good Work in His Republic by His Authority, It Is Necessary First to Eliminate Envy” [*D* III.30.T:278], Machiavelli suggests first that “virtue and goodness” can eliminate envy, and then characteristically revises his claim by adding that “goodness is not enough” [*D* III.30.1:279, 280] – implying that virtue, if not sufficient, is at least necessary.

<sup>24</sup> Extraordinary energy is needed for a prince to avoid the dangers of either being loved or being feared, according to the *Discourses*. “One cannot hold exactly to the middle way,” Machiavelli writes, for our nature does not consent to it, but it is necessary to mitigate those things that exceed with an excessive virtue” [*D* III.21.3:263; compare 22.3:266]. Perhaps most difficult is the apparently miraculous feat of ordering virtue and goodness in the same human being. In the same work Machiavelli praises

the generosity of spirit of those [Roman] citizens whom, when put in charge of an army, the greatness of their spirit lifted above every prince. They did not esteem kings, or republics; nothing terrified or frightened them. When they later returned to private status, they became frugal, humble, careful of their small competencies, obedient to the magistrates, reverent to their superiors, so that it appears impossible that one and the same spirit underwent such change [*D* III.25.1:272].

<sup>25</sup> In a later formulation, Machiavelli writes that the prince “needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him” [*P* 18:70].

<sup>26</sup> The theoretical mode of the peaceful exercise of the art of war involves reading histories and imitating some excellent man in the past [*P* 14:60]. The practical and theoretical modes of the peaceful exercise of the art of war, added to the wartime exercise of this art, make up the whole art of war, which Machiavelli says should be the only art of the prince, because many times it enables men to acquire states, and it helps them to maintain them [*P* 14:58]. Machiavelli wrote a book called *The Art of War*.

<sup>27</sup> Machiavelli repeats this reasoning in the *Discourses*. “Once one individual has made himself very familiar with a region, he then understands with ease all new countries; for every country and every member of the latter have some conformity together, so that one passes easily from the knowledge of one to the knowledge of the other” [*D* III.39.2:298]. Without this familiarization with one’s own country, one comes to know new countries either never, or only after a long time and with difficulty.

<sup>28</sup> As Mansfield puts it,

Machiavelli adumbrates the modern scientific understanding of nature that, with Bacon, abandons natural beings and begins the search for natural laws, but he does no more than adumbrate. Since he approaches the question of the nature of nature from the standpoint of what is good for human beings, he remains faithful to the fact that in morals and politics, different natures appear distinct to us, above all the difference between good and evil [*MV*, 21].

I mean here to fill out the content of Machiavelli’s adumbration with respect to human nature, and to point out the resulting tension between his abandonment of natural beings and his fidelity to the natural difference between good and evil. One sign of this tension is that while the science of sites seems to entail a mechanical or hydrodynamic account in which lifeless nature is primary [see, for example, *P* 25:98-99], the examples that Machiavelli offers for the excellent human being to imitate are chiefly living beings [compare *P* 25:100-101]. It is not clear whether the living or the nonliving is the primary category for Machiavelli’s comprehensive science.

<sup>29</sup> A reader who remembers the example of Pope Alexander VI from *The Prince* might object at this point that Alexander hoped to continue acquiring after his death, using his son Cesare Borgia as “his instrument” [*P* 11:46]. But acquisitions made through one’s offspring can be lost to death just as well as one’s own acquisitions, as long as one’s offspring are also mortal [*P* 7:31-32]. Also, it may necessarily be the case that a prince’s instruments are always inferior to him; had he lived, Alexander VI might not have made the errors that Cesare Borgia made [compare *P* 7:32-33 with 18:70]. Lastly, the pleasure of an predicted acquisition might necessarily be poorer than the pleasure of a real acquisition, if one has doubts about the possibility of enjoying it.

<sup>30</sup> We learn by Machiavelli’s treatment of the same episode in the *Discourses* that the centurion with the “obstinate spirit” was not in fact the initiator of the successful conspiracy. Rather, he was the instrument of a prefect, who was himself driven to conspire against his emperor by the necessity imposed by the prefect’s fear of death [*D* III.6.11:227]. This elaboration does not detract from Machiavelli’s admission that some human beings cannot be compelled by the threat of death, and so his admission that his science of sites is not comprehensive.

<sup>31</sup> There are other details in *The Prince* that raise similar doubts about the science of sites. For example, Machiavelli suggests that “obedience to present necessities” is what makes human beings vulnerable to being deceived [*P* 18:70]. He seems to mean not just that necessities can be manipulated [compare *D* III.12.1:247], since a human being would be no less excellent were he to be responsive to artificial necessities as well as to natural ones, nor just that necessities can be apparent rather than real, since a science of sites would distinguish only real necessities. Instead, he seems to mean to qualify his claim that it is sufficient for virtue to orient itself by necessity. In the same chapter Machiavelli also warns that “the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing”; and there is a similar passage in the *Discourses* where he writes, “all men are blind in this, in judging good or bad counsel by the end” [*D* III.35.2:291]. Again, if necessity were as knowable as Machiavelli elsewhere claims that it is, judging by the end would not be an instance of blindness or gullibility.