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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Thoughts on Machiavelli by Leo Strauss

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than formal, and it may well turn out, when all the facts are in, that the one great Moslem contribution to the development of logic beyond its Greek stage, not to be cashed in for eight hundred years, was in an area not then associated with logic at all—namely, algebra.

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*THOUGHTS ON MACHIAVELLI.* By LEO STRAUSS. Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1958. Pp. 348. \$6.00.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Machiavelli can be cited on both sides of all the issues in political philosophy. He cannot, for instance, be cited on the side of that rule by “gentlemen” which the classical political philosophers regarded as the best régime short of rule by the philosopher-king; or in favor of the view, common to both the classical and the biblical tradition, that rulers, as they go about the business of ruling, should practice moral virtue; or even in favor of the time-honored doctrine according to which tyranny is to be condemned because it subordinates the common good of a political society to the private good of one of its members. It is not an exaggeration to say that Machiavelli can be cited on both sides of so many of the issues in political philosophy as to have made him, over the centuries since he flourished, the major enigma among political philosophers—so that, as of the moment when the book here under review was published, our vast Machiavelli “literature” had become an impenetrable jungle of conflicting, not to say contradictory, answers to the questions “What *was* Machiavelli up to?” and “Was Machiavelli a ‘good guy’ or a ‘bad guy’?” It is not an exaggeration to say, either, that that literature had become a scandal, and seemed to place a question mark beside the very possibility of scholarship—that is, of inquiry leading to a consensus at least among experts—in the field of political philosophy, in a way in which the continuing scholarly debate about, for example, Plato’s political philosophy did not. With respect to the latter debate, one might indulge the hope that some things at least were being clarified, that with each generation there took place a net advance toward *the* correct reading of the important documents, that the conflicting “positions” were not utterly irreconcilable, and that, some time off in the future, the debate might therefore be stilled. With respect to the debate on Machiavelli, the movement seemed to be in the other direction: the rival interpretations of the texts seemed to get

further and further apart; and to the extent that there was a prevailing view, its very expositors seemed less than confident that they had got hold of the “essential” Machiavelli.

One of the marvels of Professor Strauss’s *Thoughts on Machiavelli* is not so much that it dispels the confusion as to what Machiavelli was up to, and whether he was or was not on the side of the angels (though it does both these things), as that it makes of the previous confusion itself a means to the understanding of Machiavelli and his place in the history of political philosophy, which is to say: as the reader of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* comes to understand the reasons for the conflicting interpretations of Machiavelli (including the reasons why he, the reader, has in the past been unable to make any sense of *The Prince* and *The Discourses*), as he comes to see that the misunderstandings of Machiavelli are Machiavelli’s own handiwork, he finds himself moving closer and closer to the core of Machiavelli’s thought, and growing in intimacy with Machiavelli the teacher. (Whatever else Machiavelli was or was not, Strauss leaves no doubt that he was one of the great teachers of all time—and, *mirabile dictu*, like most great teachers, a teacher of morals; no reader of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* will ever again flirt with the notion that Machiavelli “drove a wedge” between “politics” and “ethics,” or was the “first” political philosopher to eschew “value judgments.”) For there have been no misunderstandings about Machiavelli that Machiavelli did not invite and encourage; the misunderstandings are, therefore, one phase of what Strauss calls Machiavelli’s “plan” or intention, and, as such, they throw decisive light on the plan as a whole.

Where did the pre-Strauss commentators on Machiavelli go wrong in their attempts to decipher Machiavelli’s writings? We must, I think, pause to notice at least the major reasons. The commentators have, over the centuries, paid insufficient attention to Machiavelli’s “non-political” writings—*The Art of War*, *The Florentine Histories*, the correspondence and, most especially, the little comedy entitled *The Mandrake Root*, which are indispensable to a correct reading of *The Prince* and *The Discourses*. They have paid insufficient attention also to the “Epistles Dedicatory” of *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, or at least have not taken them seriously enough as statements of Machiavelli’s intention. They have frittered away their energies on a problem, a question-begging problem at that, which they have themselves (with Machiavelli’s encouragement, to be sure) manufactured—namely, the problem of the “relation” between the political philosophy of *The Prince* and the political philosophy of *The Discourses*—refusing to

consider the possibility that they are alternative statements of one and the same political philosophy. They have sought to pin Machiavelli down on a whole series of “issues” that he certainly regarded as *questions mal posées* or, worse still, nonsense questions, overlooking the fact that in one decisive dimension—the dimension in which we decide whether there are “permanent” problems in political philosophy and, if so, what the permanent problems are—Machiavelli had little or no quarrel with the classical political philosophers. They have sought to solve the problem of the “relation” between *The Prince* and *The Discourses* without first exhausting the problem of what, taken separately, each of the two books actually says. They have failed to correct, in their reading of Machiavelli, for possible error arising from the fact that they themselves, to an extent unknown to themselves, are pupils of Machiavelli, unable to read him objectively or to recognize Machiavelli’s innovations as innovations. Above all, they have failed to decipher Machiavelli’s writings because they have not realized that the task of deciphering Machiavelli is just that: a venture in *deciphering*, in the unraveling of an incredibly ingenious, deliberately devised puzzle, so constructed that 999 out of the 1,000 rare readers who will stay the course will never suspect that it is a puzzle.

Since that is the point at which most readers of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* will cavil (not to say lay the book aside as preposterous) as also the point on which the book must stand or fall, let us pause for some examples of how Professor Strauss reads Machiavelli.

(1) *The Prince* appears to be, and has always been read as, a “tract for the times,” hair-raising because it seems to defend the wicked notion that the “end” justifies the “means.” As a tract for the times, however, it adds up—see (2) below—to something just short of nonsense, obliging us to raise the question whether it is in fact not a tract for the times, but a venture in political philosophy *sensu stricto*, dealing obliquely with one of political philosophy’s permanent problems. Now, if we break the book up into parts dealing with different subject matters, which proves easy to do, and look at them with the “hypothesis” that Machiavelli, imitating a well-known device of the classical writers, situates the important in the “center,” we finally see that all the central chapters deal with the same topic, namely, the problem of the “founder,” or the foundation of society. Then *The Prince* does fall into shape as a treatise, hidden behind what appears to be a tract for the times, on the greatest of the great permanent problems of political philosophy. Machiavelli has given us, in “secret writing,” a major hint as to how to read his book.

(2) The famous final chapter (26) of *The Prince*, upon which the commentators have relied most heavily in attempting to construe the book, proves upon examination to be “sour”: Machiavelli suddenly turns “pious,” speaking of “miracles” as if he actually believed in them; Romulus suddenly disappears from the list of great “founders” as he has given it to us earlier; the chapter appears to be a summons to Lorenzo to lead Italy to the Promised Land, but great emphasis is placed on Moses (of whom, beginning to catch on, we will remember that he precisely did not reach the Promised Land, but died on its frontiers); the chapter says nothing of the political obstacles Lorenzo would have to surmount in order to liberate and unify Italy, though these have been stressed in earlier chapters. If, however, we refer the chapter to the dominant theme of the book as identified by the central chapters, and then re-examine it, it falls neatly into place as necessary to Machiavelli’s plan, though only because it now takes on a meaning quite different from what it seems to say. More: if we look at Chapter 26 of *The Discourses*, we find that it deals with the topic of the central chapters of *The Prince* and “rounds out” the central argument of *The Prince* very nicely indeed. Machiavelli, by giving the two chapters the same number, tells us that we must look hard at that final chapter of *The Prince*.

(3) If we read *The Discourses* with a view to bringing together all the “statements” Machiavelli makes on a given topic, we are obliged to recognize that either Machiavelli was a stupid and careless fellow who contradicted himself all over the place, or that the contradictions are intentional and have their role in the “plan” of the book. The typical series of such statements turns out to move from a more or less “respectable” opinion, through “qualification” after “qualification,” to a final statement, decidedly not respectable, that is, *not* qualified by any other statement and that rests upon that fuller understanding of the complex topic in hand that is, so to speak, provided by the qualifications. Machiavelli leads us, along a path marked out for us by apparent contradictions, to the position that he is in fact urging on his readers.

(4) *The Discourses* have an explicit “plan”: the book will deal with such and such topics in such and such order. That plan, however, turns out to be a piece of deliberate deception; there is a second, “secret” plan, which we discover by, for example, identifying series of chapters linked together by references forward in concluding sentences and backward in initial sentences, or, again for example, by identifying series of chapters dealing with a single topic (for example,

gratitude) not mentioned in the explicit plan. The hidden plan is the “real” plan of the book; in the act of hiding it, Machiavelli again points the way to the core of his teaching.

(5) The meticulous reader of *The Discourses* will come finally to recognize that Machiavelli is playing some kind of game as regards (a) that to which he appeals as authoritative (the example of the “ancients,” the example of Rome, and so forth) and (b), more specifically, his “use” of Livy (sometimes he quotes Livy in Latin, sometimes he quotes him in Italian, sometimes he merely refers to him, sometimes he does not refer to him but uses an example so clearly taken from Livy as to be tantamount to a reference to Livy, sometimes he quotes Livy inaccurately, sometimes he changes or embroiders upon matter taken from Livy, and so forth). On one level, the problem of reading *The Discourses* becomes that of deciding whether Machiavelli is being “careless” or, once again, pointing us along toward hidden doctrines. (“It is fortunate for the historians of ideas,” writes Strauss, “. . . that there are not many books of this kind.”) And, here again, we find we are dealing with a pedagogical device that, off at the end, we can see to be indispensable to the realization of Machiavelli’s “plan.”

*Thoughts on Machiavelli* stands or falls, I repeat, on the issue: are *The Prince* and *The Discourses* elaborate ventures in “hidden writing,” or is Strauss “seeing things”? Many readers, as this reviewer knows already from personal experience, will be able to resolve that issue—unfavorably to the book, of course—if not a priori then at the end, say, of Chapter Two (“Machiavelli’s Intention: *The Prince*”), on the grounds that grown men do not “play games” of this kind in philosophical writings. Who, they will ask, ever heard of such a thing? For that reason, and the further reason that the reader who open-mindedly sets down to check it all may give six months of his life a goodbye kiss, *Thoughts* will not, for many a long day, still the debate about Machiavelli’s political thought. I can only say, having checked out most of it, that in my opinion Strauss will win any future argument on the basic issue as I have stated it, that anyone who henceforth attempts to write on Machiavelli without taking *Thoughts* as his point of departure will be wasting his time, and that the “new” Machiavelli which Strauss conjures up for us out of the cryptograms, along with the “new” Hobbes, the “new” Spinoza, the “new” Locke, and the “new” Rousseau that we get in consequence of the “new” Machiavelli, will ultimately sweep the field of all competitors. The Strauss revolution in the interpretation of modern political philosophy is the

decisive development in modern political philosophy since Machiavelli himself.

Does Strauss ask us to believe that he alone, among the tens of thousands of readers who have read Machiavelli's works over the centuries, has really understood him? He would, I am confident, answer that he could only wish that that were true, that on the contrary Machiavelli has been understood over the centuries, and understood precisely as Strauss understands him, by the kind of men for whom Machiavelli in fact wrote, that these men have grasped Machiavelli's plan and contributed to its execution, and that the result is nothing less than modern political philosophy. The world, I think he might add, would be a vastly more pleasant place in which to live—with philosophy itself as the major beneficiary—had the Machiavelli puzzle indeed never been solved before the mid-twentieth century.

Why did not Machiavelli (and Hobbes, and the others) just come out and say it? Why "hidden writing"? Great political thinkers, answers Strauss, are "stepsons" of their time: were they to express themselves candidly and unambiguously they would speedily run afoul of the authorities or, if not that, then be torn limb from limb by their neighbors. Indeed, one might trace the history of modern political philosophy by tracing the disappearance of the need so to hide thoughts like Machiavelli's where none but the select few can dig them up, or, to put it the other way 'round, by tracing the emergence of the need to hide thoughts unlike Machiavelli's where the unselect many, risen to the high places in the world of the intellect, are unlikely to notice them.

What was the "new" Machiavelli up to? Quite simply, if I understand Strauss, Machiavelli was out to do what Machiavelli and his "great successors" (Strauss's own phrase) have in fact done: to destroy the influence of the Great Tradition (that is, the classical-biblical tradition) in the world of the intellect. Machiavelli "imitates" the Socrates of the *Republic*: he addresses himself to the best of his young contemporaries, and through them to the young of future generations, engages them, fascinates them, and leads them by the hand, never arguing with them, into a new way of thinking about politics and morals. Socrates leads the young into classical political philosophy; Machiavelli leads the young into modern political philosophy as we know it. Neither Socrates nor the "new" Machiavelli, I repeat, sets out to "refute" the tradition he would destroy: Socrates' great skill, imitated by Machiavelli, is that of conducting his pupils through, so to speak, the "paces" of the new way of thinking, and so *habituating*

them to it. The Machiavelli “problem” therefore becomes that of identifying the strategic points at which, on the very deepest level, which is that of the great permanent problems, Machiavelli takes issue with the tradition he challenges, since Machiavelli’s “statements” on these issues become the axioms of the new political geometry, as they are also the only propositions in Machiavelli that Machiavelli leaves to stand without qualifications. On one side, one might say, Machiavelli’s great achievement is to isolate the propositions, not necessarily explicit propositions, that are so central to the tradition that, once they are removed, the tradition crashes to the ground; the essence of Machiavellism has nothing to do with nonsense questions like that of the end justifying the means (for the “new” Machiavelli no end could justify wholly “good” means), but consists of the denial of those propositions. Machiavelli’s thought, in other words, rests on an astonishing prior analysis of the classical tradition, as one may see from the following examples of the propositions Machiavelli identifies, through his denials, as strategic: Good things, the classics held, came from good beginnings; not so, replies Machiavelli, good things come precisely from bad beginnings: morality depends, alike for its birth and its sustenance, on immorality. Good things, the classical writers believed, are good simply; not so, according to Machiavelli: all good things have their characteristic defect, inseparable from their goodness. Man and political society, the classics fondly supposed, are simultaneous; not so, counters Machiavelli, thus opening the door into which Hobbes and Locke will disappear: man precedes society, which is the handiwork of those men of great brain whom we call “founders.” Man is a political animal, to whom society is natural; not so, insists Machiavelli: man is merely malleable, merely capable of a wide range of self-regarding responses to the carrot and the stick. Virtue, the classics taught, should be practiced for its own sake, and consists in habituation to good behavior; nonsense, says Machiavelli: true virtue consists in being good and bad by turns, as the “situation” may require. The desire for wealth, for glory, for freedom to do what one pleases, should according to the classics be subordinated to the requirements of the good life; not so for the new way of thinking about politics and morals: precisely what is needed, in order that there should exist that paltry minimum of good that is in fact possible, is to emancipate the desire to acquire. In order to think about politics, the classics taught, you must think of man not in terms of what he is but what he might become; not so, teaches Machiavelli, anticipating Rousseau and the entire apparatus of reductionism: in order to make sense about



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politics we must take men as they are, not as they might be. That Machiavelli's denials fit together into a "position" which, once you concede the axioms, is airtight (that is, impenetrable from outside), Strauss leaves no doubt. That they are the foundations of the political philosophy that today dominates the intellectual world, Strauss will convince all who do not close their ears.

Would it be too much to expect so skillful a decipherer of ciphers as Professor Strauss to write a book without including a little secret writing of his own? I think so—do not, indeed, exclude the possibility that some future Strauss will be needed, after modern political philosophy has run its course, to ferret out the "essential" Strauss, who no more than Machiavelli is a man to blurt things out. Certainly he nowhere tells us, in *Thoughts*, how the mischief the Machiavellians have done can be undone. But Strauss's silence on this point is perhaps as explicit a statement as the "situation" and the "quality of the times" call for, and what it says is: the mischief can be undone only by a great teacher who feels within himself a strength and a vocation not less than Machiavelli's own, who possesses a store of learning not inferior to Machiavelli's own, who will take the best of the young, of this generation and future generations, and, leading them by the hand without arguing with them, habituate them to the denial of Machiavelli's denials.

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*LAWS OF FREEDOM: A STUDY OF KANT'S METHOD OF APPLYING THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE IN THE METAPHYSIK DER SITTEN.* By MARY J. GREGOR. New York, Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1963. Pp. xv, 208. \$5.00.

The English-speaking world waited a hundred and sixty-five years for an adequate translation and full study of Kant's *Metaphysik der Sitten*, and then in the course of one year got two translations of its long *Introduction* and *Doctrine of Virtue*<sup>1</sup> as well as this fine commentary. One of Kant's most interesting and difficult works is now finally available. No longer will it be common to confuse Kant's "general practical philosophy" with his ethics, or necessary to guess at his

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<sup>1</sup> *The Doctrine of Virtue*, trans. by Mary J. Gregor with a foreword by H. J. Patton (New York, 1964); *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, trans. by James Ellington, with an introduction by Warner Wick (New York, 1964).