

MINDAUGAS STOŠKUS

## MACHIAVELLI'S *THE PRINCE*: HOW TO REFUTE VIRTUE ETHICS IN THREE STEPS

**Abstract.** This article examines Niccolò Machiavelli's account of virtues in his famous work *The Prince*. The Italian philosopher uses three different stages or steps of argumentation. All these steps are analyzed in this paper. It is argued that in each step, Machiavelli makes partial conclusions which are neglected in the next step. In the last step, Machiavelli concludes that not only some virtues lead to failure, but all virtues are harmful to a successful leader. Instead of an honest and just way of acting, Machiavelli proposes the slyness of a fox – the most effective and successful way of acting. Cicero's *De Officiis* effectively helps to understand the radicality of Machiavelli's account of virtues. Cicero's work enables one to explain all the central metaphors and analogies used in Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Comparing Cicero's and Machiavelli's radically different accounts of the same virtues and vices shows that Machiavelli changed the traditional understanding of virtues, thus refuting traditional moral and political philosophy.

**Keywords:** Niccolò Machiavelli; *The Prince*; virtues; vices; fox metaphor; Cicero

1. Introduction. 2. First step: the reverence for a tradition. 3. Second step: the confusion of virtues and vices. 4. Third step: contraposition to classical ethics. 5. Conclusions.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There are at least two notable features of the intellectual legacy of Niccolò Machiavelli and his most famous work. Firstly, the tremendous and enduring academic and nonacademic attention it was given to such a short book as *The Prince*, both in Machiavelli's native country (in 2022 alone, several important monographs have been published or republished in Italian, e.g. Ciliberto 2022; Del Lucchese 2022; Desiderio 2022; Costigliolo 2022) and worldwide. Secondly, the wide variety of interpretations, sometimes radically different, of this short book since the time of Machiavelli (see Giorgini 2013, 625-640; Hankins 2014, 98-109; Quadlioni

2014, 110-121). There are not many books in the history of philosophy with so many different, even radically controversial, interpretations. Raymond Angelo Belliotti, for example, counts up to ten different interpretations and mentions that there might be a half-dozen more (Belliotti 2009 17). If a list of controversial books existed, there is no doubt that Machiavelli's *The Prince* would be at the top.

Such different interpretations of *The Prince* (Fournell 2014, 85-97) are determined by the diverging opinions concerning the main aspects of the book. What is it about Machiavelli's account of virtues that inspire such different interpretations? Did he separate ethics from politics? Was he a defender of tyranny? Did he propagate amoral politics? Commentators of Machiavelli radically disagree on these and many other questions. In turn, this raises no less exciting question: what determines these controversial interpretations? The ambivalency of Machiavelli's ideas and arguments, or perhaps the philosophical, religious, and moral presuppositions of the commentators? Examining the latter issue would require extensive investigation. This article aims at a smaller goal: namely, to describe and explain Machiavelli's attitude toward virtues.

This paper presupposes that the main idea determining the whole book concerns Machiavelli's attitude towards virtues, which is not explained straightforwardly by Machiavelli himself. Leo Strauss claimed that Machiavelli usually reveals his views in stages. According to him, the Italian philosopher ascends from initial statements to complex statements, from conventional to revolutionary (Strauss 1958, 43). This article argues that Machiavelli uses three stages or steps of argumentation. In particular, he negates the partial conclusions reached in the earlier stages in each new step. The third and most important step is only half-formulated. It is not clear why Machiavelli used metaphors and analogies instead of frank and direct language in his last step. Perhaps it was too obscene. Or maybe Machiavelli – the genius writer – wanted the reader to formulate a conclusion himself, without assistance (as, for example, Plato did in

his dialogues). So, where and what did Machiavelli teach his reader about virtues in *The Prince*?

Machiavelli is silent about virtues for almost half of his book. The whole argument towards virtues was made in chapters XV-XVIII. In later chapters, questions concerning virtues almost disappear. It might be that chapters XV-XVIII are the core of *The Prince*. Some essential ethical ideas are mentioned in other chapters (for example, in chapter VIII), and they also help to understand Machiavelli's moral teaching. However, none of them has such importance as chapters XV-XVIII. In these four chapters, Machiavelli explains three steps of his reasoning toward an account of virtues.

## 2. FIRST STEP: THE REVERENCE FOR A TRADITION

The first stage in which Machiavelli explains his attitude toward virtues is very traditional and disappointing for those looking for blasphemies in this famous book. The Italian philosopher points out that all virtues are good and all vices are wrong, and this is his first thesis about virtues. Also, according to Machiavelli, all (including the ruler) should have as many virtues as possible: "And I'm sure we'd all agree that it would be an excellent thing if a ruler were to have all the good qualities mentioned above and none of the bad" (Machiavelli 2014, 61). In this step of argumentation, Machiavelli also says that people cannot have only virtues and no vices. In other words, there is no perfect man and this is not an ideal world. This is a traditional view in ancient and Christian moral theory.

What could Machiavelli teach the ruler in this stage? He says that "if a ruler wants to survive, he'll have to learn to stop being good, at least when the occasion demands" (Machiavelli 2014, 60). This assertion is quite sober. It means that man sometimes has to choose both good and bad ends. Ancient and Christian morality admits that sometimes one has to choose between two or more evils, and the less bad must be chosen in that situation (Aristotle 2009, 2.9.4;

Cicero 1928, III.102; Aquinas 1952, III Suppl., q. 47, a. 2; Clark 2008, 3-16). Machiavelli tells the same truth, only in a different manner: “since it’s in the nature of life that you can’t have or practice all those qualities all of the time, a ruler must take care to avoid the disgrace that goes with the kind of failings that could lose him his position. As for failings that wouldn’t lead to his losing power, he should avoid them if he can; but if he can’t, he needn’t worry too much” (Machiavelli 2014, 61).

No man could achieve moral perfection. Hence, Machiavelli admits the value of virtues. According to him, it is good to have all of them. However, the reality is different. No one can escape vices. Vices differ in their badness, and man must find out which are most dangerous and especially avoid them. Machiavelli warns the ruler that the vices most hazardous to him are those that lead to the loss of power. Therefore, the conclusion of this first stage is that virtues are good, vices are wrong and people should seek virtues and avoid vices as much as possible. However, the perfect realization of virtues is impossible. Vices are thus inevitable. People should learn to recognize the most dangerous vices and especially avoid them.

If Machiavelli had said only this, it would be difficult to understand his warning at the beginning of chapter XV: “I fear people may find my contribution presumptuous, especially since, here more than elsewhere, the code of conduct I’m offering will be rather controversial” (Machiavelli 2014, 60). It is hard to find anything controversial in the first stage of his argument. The transition to the next stage appears in the last sentence of chapter XV, and this statement by no means leads to controversies. According to Machiavelli, “If you think about it, there’ll always be something that looks morally right but would actually lead a ruler to disaster, and something else that looks wrong but will bring security and success” (Machiavelli 2014, 61). Chapters XVI and XVII are devoted to proving this insight.

### 3. SECOND STEP: THE CONFUSION OF VIRTUES AND VICES

After saying that all virtues are good and all vices are wrong, Machiavelli changes his mind and defends the thesis that some virtues yield bad results, and some vices yield good ones. In other words, some virtues are wrong and some vices are good. Traditional virtue ethics teaches the opposite: virtues are good because they lead to something beneficial for the person, community, or both. Vices are wrong because they lead to something bad for the person, community, or both. Machiavelli thinks that there might be some exceptions to this general account. The first one concerns generosity and meanness.

In chapter XVI, the Italian philosopher argues that generosity in politics always leads to misfortune and must be replaced by meanness. To this end, Machiavelli gives “economics” arguments showing that meanness can lead to economic and political prosperity. While the arguments are fairly temperate and far from radical, it is easy to realize that Machiavelli’s thought becomes more and more categorical: “In our own times the only leaders we’ve seen doing great things were all reckoned mean. The others were failures” (Machiavelli 2014, 63). The Italian philosopher finds two exceptions to this rule. According to Machiavelli, generosity is acceptable when a man tries to acquire power (but it is always better to be mean when power is obtained) or when another country’s wealth is wasted. Nevertheless, the rule is clear: “Above all else a king must guard against being despised and hated. Generosity leads to both” (Machiavelli 2014, 64). In summary, generosity is wrong. Therefore, strictly speaking, it cannot be called a virtue. In this context, meanness is much more virtuous than generosity. This is undoubtedly a confusing conclusion.

In chapter XVII, Machiavelli continues to confuse virtues and vices (some scholars – e.g. Gillespie 2017, 13-35 – continue this confusion in their commentaries). Machiavelli begins by explaining cruelty and compassion. His explanation becomes more and more radical: it is one thing to legitimate meanness, but it is quite another to advocate

cruelty. Therefore, Machiavelli must introduce stronger arguments. If generosity and meanness mainly concern economic aspects, cruelty, and compassion are primarily related to peace and order. According to Machiavelli, just as meanness helps secure the state's economic prosperity, cruelty can maintain peace and order (which are more important than economic wealth). That is why "A ruler mustn't worry about being labeled cruel when it's a question of keeping his subjects loyal and united" (Machiavelli 2014, 65). It is evident to Machiavelli that "excessive compassion" will lead to disorder, muggings, and murder.

Chapter XVII is exceptional not only for its analysis of cruelty and compassion. Here the Italian philosopher introduces his most explicit understanding of human nature. According to Machiavelli, "We can say this of most people: that they are ungrateful and unreliable; they lie, they fake, they're greedy for cash and they melt away in the face of danger. So long as you're generous and, as I said before, not in immediate danger, they're all on your side: they'd shed their blood for you, they'd give you their belongings, their lives, their children. But when you need them they turn their backs on you" (Machiavelli 2014, 66). These impressive statements support Machiavelli's proposal that is preferable to be feared than loved, which follows directly from his understanding of human nature. Only a madman could rely on love. Fear arises through cruelty. Therefore cruelty is the best (if not the only reliable) option for a leader.

Here two things must be mentioned. Firstly, Machiavelli warns users of cruelty not to arouse hatred. In all his work, he stresses that arousing people's hatred is one of the biggest political mistakes. Machiavelli ensures that being feared but not hated are perfectly compatible. His suggestion on how to achieve this is obvious and straightforward: rulers must keep their hands off subjects' property and women. This attitude promotes two main goals, which, according to Machiavelli, all people seek – wealth and glory (Machiavelli 2014, 99). Wealth here matches property; women perhaps both wealth and

glory. This advice also corresponds to his understanding of human nature (or more precisely to the features of human nature Machiavelli accentuates).

Secondly, while confusing virtues and vices Machiavelli more or less consciously distorts the classical understanding of virtues. When Machiavelli discusses generosity and compassion, he frequently has in mind somewhat different things. For example, he warns a leader not to use compassion unwisely (Machiavelli 2014, 65). The same applies to generosity. A person can be “too much generous” or “too little generous.” Someone might be “too compassionate.” It seems that for Machiavelli virtue ethics has a binary structure: the less a person is mean, the more he becomes generous. Generosity might become extreme and, therefore, wrong. Nevertheless, classical virtue ethics unambiguously emphasizes that virtue cannot be extreme.

It is hard to believe that Machiavelli did not know that truism. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as too much virtue. Because “too much” (as “too little”) concerns the realm of vices. If a man is “too much generous,” he is a squanderer. Machiavelli speaks about excesses in chapters XVI and XVII. Excesses, as well as deficiencies, are not virtues. They are vices, and it is right to criticize them. However, Machiavelli’s critical statements are misleading. In addition to admitting that vices are bad, he seems to maintain that virtues are bad qua virtues. The Italian philosopher disregards such deficiencies and proceeds to formulate his the partial conclusions of this second step of his argument. Nevertheless, these partial conclusions rest on an inadequate (if not caricatured) understanding of virtues.

In chapters XVI and XVII Machiavelli’s attitude towards virtues and vices changes significantly. In chapter XV, he claims that a leader must possess as many virtues as possible and try to escape as many vices as possible. Later Machiavelli changes his mind and defends the position that there are some virtues that leaders must avoid (and some vices to be preferred). In the first stage, every virtue was a good option. Later in the text, Machiavelli argues that some virtues

are pernicious and some vices are salvatory. As a result, a leader must possess some vices. This does not make a leader defective. On the contrary, it makes him (and the whole country) stronger. This may be the most important conclusion in the second step of his argument toward an account of virtues.

#### 4. THIRD STEP: CONTRAPOSITION TO CLASSICAL ETHICS

In chapter XVIII, Machiavelli considers the virtue of honesty. According to him, it is evident that leaders who do not keep their word, lie, break promises, and deceit usually prevail over those who are fair. In this sense, honesty is similar to compassion and generosity – possession of these virtues leads to failure. What should replace it? In the previous chapters, Machiavelli offered vices – meanness and cruelty. Replacing honesty with dishonesty, however, was a more challenging task because Machiavelli was aware of the close connection between honesty and justice, and that the virtue of justice is the core of ancient and medieval political and moral philosophy.

In analyzing Machiavelli's third step, it is crucial to consider Cicero's *De Officiis* for at least three reasons. Firstly, this ancient work was very popular in Machiavelli's times, and no doubt the Italian philosopher was familiar with its main ideas (Colish 1978, 82-83). Secondly, there is a very close connection between *The Prince* and the *De Officiis*. The two books share many topics and analogies (Barlow 1999, 627-645). It might even be the case that Machiavelli deliberately wrote his book (especially chapters XV-XVIII) to refute the most important ethical ideas in *De Officiis* (Michelle T. Clarke reaches a similar conclusion through a somewhat different comparison. See Clarke 2021, 93). Thirdly and most importantly, Machiavelli's metaphors and analogies of the fox and the lion and his overall account of virtues, can hardly be understood adequately without close reference to Cicero's work (examples of simplified and misleading



analyses of the fox and the lion analogy can be found in Belliotti 2009, 33-35; Benner 2009, 197-201; 2013, 179-224; Brunello 2019, 330).

As mentioned above, when Machiavelli doubts the value of honesty he challenges justice as well. These two virtues can not be separated because, as Cicero mentioned, “The foundation of justice ... is good faith – that is, truth and fidelity to promises and agreements” (Cicero 1928, I.23). Machiavelli does not mention the virtue of justice directly. He also does not mention the virtue of honesty in the title of chapter XVIII. This stands in stark contrast with chapters XVI and XVII, where virtues are directly mentioned in the titles. Such unusual reticence can be interpreted as a pointer: the most important things concerning virtues can be written here. Moreover, this reticence in the title suggests that the major insights of chapter XVIII are somehow concealed, or at least not discussed directly.

That is why Machiavelli does not directly mention the vice of dishonesty – a natural solution when the virtue of honesty fails. In chapters XVI and XVII, he frankly mentioned vices. In chapter XVIII, Machiavelli introduces expressive allegories and analogies instead. This would be an excessive effort if Machiavelli did not consider it important. It is easy to foresee that the traditional virtue of justice would become meaningless if someone succeeded in demonstrating that its foundation – honesty – is not a virtue, but a political scarcity, i.e. a vice. As one of the four cardinal virtues, justice is an important pillar of traditional virtue ethics and political philosophy. No doubt, Machiavelli understood that the fastest way to demolish traditional moral and political theory would be to destroy its foundation. After damaging the foundation, the whole building would collapse.

Machiavelli had no doubts that traditional moral and political theory deserved to be demolished because of its lack of practical utility (moreover, it might lead to danger and failure). Machiavelli frankly expressed his attitude towards the philosophical tradition in chapter XV: “But since my aim was to write something useful for

anyone interested, I felt it would be appropriate to go to the real truth of the matter, not to repeat other people's fantasies. Many writers have dreamed up republics and kingdoms that bear no resemblance to experience and never existed in reality; there is such a gap between how people live and how they ought to live that anyone who declines to behave as people do in order to behave as they should, is schooling himself for catastrophe and had better forget personal security" (Machiavelli 2014, 60). Despite such an unequivocal attitude towards traditional moral and political theory, the beginning of the crucial part of Machiavelli's work – the destruction of its foundation – is characterized by Aesopian language, analogies, allegories, and even inaccuracies.

Before introducing the famous analogy of the fox and the lion, Machiavelli discusses different ways of fighting: "The reader should bear in mind that there are two ways of doing battle: using the law and using force. Typically, humans use laws and animal force. But since playing by the law often proves inadequate, it also makes sense to resort to force. Hence a ruler must be able to exploit both the man and the beast in himself to the full" (Machiavelli 2014, 69). "Using the law" here means acting honestly and justly. Humans can reason and formulate moral and legal laws. Therefore, the first way of acting is reserved for human beings. Animals cannot rationally formulate or obey laws. Therefore, they can rely only on force. Using animal force also means acting in two different ways. Here Machiavelli introduces the analogy of the fox and the lion: "Since a ruler has to be able to act like the beast, he should take on traits of the fox and the lion; the lion can't defend itself against snares, and the fox can't defend itself from wolves" (Machiavelli 2014, 69). Accordingly, Machiavelli identifies three ways of acting: of humans, of the lion, and the fox.

Machiavelli justifies the necessity to use bestial modes Machiavelli also through an example from ancient myths. According to him, this is not a new idea. Ancient authors ostensibly propose the same idea while telling stories about leaders who were taught by the centaur

Chiron – half-man, half-beast (“This story ... obviously meant that a ruler had to be able to draw on both natures. If he had only one, he wouldn’t survive”; Machiavelli 2014, 69). This is supposed to soften the severity of Machiavelli’s proposal and even deny responsibility for it. However, it is a strongly misleading example. Chiron was not half-man and half-beast. He was an immortal god, the son of Titan Cronos and goddess Philyra. The birth of Chiron is accidental and misleading, determined by the fact that his father Chronus, before making love with his mother Philyra has turned himself into a horse. The lineage of all other centaurs who are considered half-human and half-horses is different. God Chiron was a renowned teacher of heroes, famous for his wisdom and kindness (to say the least, this is not a very good example of a mentor who teaches to draw on both natures – human and bestial).

That said, the example of Chiron is not key to Machiavelli’s arguments. He is certain that a leader simply cannot avoid identifying with the nature of the beast if he wants to survive. It is not hard to understand why. The power of the lion or the slyness of the fox (and especially their combination) will always prevail over the law. Here a dilemma arises: which way of acting is most preferable? At first, common sense might suggest the law. Only if it does not succeed, a different way must be elaborated – that of a lion or a fox. Machiavelli’s arguments lead to a different conclusion. Firstly, Machiavelli names the most effective way of acting. It is neither the way of the law nor the way of the lion. According to him, “Those best at playing the fox have done better than the others” (Machiavelli 2014, 70). Secondly, the intrinsic logic of Machiavelli’s reasoning suggests the same idea: the way of the fox is preferable.

The analogy of the fox helps to understand the essence of Machiavelli’s account of virtues. Here one important question must be raised: what does it mean to be a perfect fox? The *modus vivendi* of the fox is characterized by slyness and cunning. The true fox is not only sly but can also hide its slyness. The ability to conceal

its slyness shows the perfection of the sly fox. Machiavelli perfectly understands that playing the fox, “you have to know how to disguise your slyness, how to pretend one thing and cover up another” (Machiavelli 2014, 70). A fox who pretends to be a lion is not perfectly sly, but a fox pretending to be a human surely is. A fox cannot act by law; it cannot be virtuous by nature. But a fox can imitate virtues and virtuous acts. A fox doing it very well reaches its perfection. It is in this context that Machiavelli writes that “a leader doesn’t have to possess all the virtuous qualities I’ve mentioned, but he must seem to possess them. I’ll go so far as to say this: if he had those qualities and observed them all the time, he’d be putting himself at risk. It’s seeming to be virtuous that helps” (Machiavelli 2014, 70). This step in his reasoning towards an account of virtues is revolutionary. Machiavelli states that possessing virtues is pernicious; only a perfect imitation of virtues is helpful.

Machiavelli makes that statement in chapter XVIII, which is devoted to the virtue of honesty. If it is harmful to possess the virtue of honesty, which is the foundation of justice. It is also harmful to possess justice itself. As mentioned above, the virtue of justice is the core of the whole traditional moral and political philosophy. Therefore, there is no necessity to analyze other virtues separately, their usefulness or harmfulness, because the entire traditional system of virtues collapses once justice is disqualified. Then acting as a fox becomes the most valuable strategy with as many opportunities as possible. Only a fox can act like a human or a lion (when it is useful) without betraying its nature as a fox. The ability to imitate virtues enables one to use virtues and vices depending on the situation. All the weapons are on the side of the fox. Honesty and justice provide only fair weapons. As a result, honesty and justice fail together with the traditional moral and political philosophy based on them.

The radical departure from traditional moral and political philosophy becomes more evident when Machiavelli’s statements are compared with Cicero’s. In his reasoning towards an account

of virtues, the Italian philosopher uses similar and sometimes identical analogies and parallels, as well as the same pairs of virtues and vices as Cicero in his *De Officiis*. Cicero analyses the opposites of generosity and avarice, love and fear, and honesty and slyness. However, the conclusions of the two philosophers are radically opposite. Cicero emphasizes the virtue of generosity (“nothing appeals more to the best in human nature than this”; Cicero 1928, I.14). He also forewarns the reader of the vice of squandering, which might be considered similar to generosity. Cicero’s detailed analysis of generosity is radically different from Machiavelli’s. Moreover, Cicero emphasizes the strong connection between generosity and justice: “nothing is generous, if it is not at the same time just” (Cicero 1928, I.14). It seems that for Cicero, the virtue of justice plays a crucial role in human action.

In chapter XVII, Machiavelli raises the question of whether it is better to be loved than feared? All arguments of the Italian philosopher lean towards fear. Cicero also discusses fear and love, but his views diverge from Machiavelli’s. According to Cicero, “of all motives, none is better adapted to secure influence and hold it fast than love; nothing is more foreign to that end than fear. ... For fear is but a poor safeguard of lasting power; while affection, on the other hand, may be trusted to keep it safe forever” (Cicero 1928, II.23). Cicero emphasizes the main defect of fear: it goes together with cruelty, for cruelty is necessary to raise fear. Machiavelli is certain that cruelty is necessary for a successful leader. Hence, for him, it is not a defect.

Machiavelli’s departure from classical ethics is also evident in his analysis of honesty and keeping one’s promises. The Italian philosopher is certain that “a sensible leader cannot and must not keep his word if by doing so he puts himself at risk, and if the reasons that made him give his word in the first place are no longer valid” (Machiavelli 2014, 70). Cicero also discusses these virtues in his work. According to him, however, “if under stress of circumstances

individuals have made any promise to the enemy, they are bound to keep their word even then” (Cicero 1928, I.39). Cicero emphasizes the importance of honesty even with the enemy. Machiavelli does not think honesty is affected by one’s relationship with the enemy. He supports dishonesty not only with the enemy but with everyone.

The key differences between the two philosophers become evident when the modes of acting are discussed (Barlow 1999, 637). The analogy of the fox and the lion is not an invention of Machiavelli. Cicero uses it in a similar context as the Italian philosopher. According to Cicero, “While wrong may be done, then, in either of two ways, that is, by force or by fraud, both are bestial: fraud seems to belong to the cunning fox, force to the lion; both are wholly unworthy of man, but fraud is the more contemptible” (Cicero 1928, I.41). What is gently hidden in chapter XVIII of *The Prince* is openly highlighted in the *De Officiis*. Cicero unambiguously claims that both bestial ways of acting are essentially unjust. To promote them is to promote injustice. As mentioned above, Machiavelli is certain that the tactic of the fox is the most effective and successful, and that the perfect fox can perfectly imitate all virtues. According to Machiavelli, the way of the fox is the most preferable. In this context, it is worth mentioning that for Cicero not all unjust ways of acting are equally bad. Some bad ways are worse than others. According to Cicero, “of all forms of injustice, none is more flagrant than that of the hypocrite who, at the very moment when he is most false, makes it his business to appear virtuous” (Cicero 1928, I.41). Therefore, Machiavelli promotes not only an unjust way of acting. He promotes radical injustice. This cannot be interpreted in any other way but as a radical departure from all the essential ideas of traditional moral and political philosophy.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In chapters XV-XIII of his most famous work, *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses three virtues and vices: generosity and meanness, compassion and cruelty, and honesty and slyness. His reasoning towards an account of virtues and vices can be divided into three steps or stages. In each step, Machiavelli's statements become more radical. In the first step, the Italian philosopher pays tribute to tradition and claims that all virtues are good and all vices are bad. Unfortunately, moral perfection is unreachable for human beings. Therefore, the inevitability of vices must be admitted. In the second step, Machiavelli begins by confusing virtues and vices. He suggests three situations in which vices (meanness, cruelty, and slyness) lead to success and virtues (generosity, compassion, and honesty) lead to failure. The third step is the most important and enigmatic because Machiavelli uses metaphors and analogies instead of a direct and unambiguous argument. When Machiavelli introduces the way of the fox as the most successful way of acting, he not only discredits honesty but justice as well. As a result, the whole traditional moral and political philosophy based on the virtue of justice collapses.

Machiavelli's radical attitude towards traditional moral and political philosophy becomes clear when his account of virtues is compared with Cicero's. In his book *De Officiis*, Cicero discusses the same questions as Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Cicero compares generosity and avarice, love and fear, and honesty and slyness. Moreover, he compares human and animal ways of acting, including the ways of the fox and the lion. Cicero concludes that the way of the fox is the most inhumane because it is the most unjust. Machiavelli's conclusions are radically opposite to Cicero's in every respect. The same metaphors and analogies in both texts suggest their deep connection. It can thus be concluded that Machiavelli intended to oppose Cicero's account of virtues and to discredit traditional moral and political philosophy.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aquinas, T. (1952). *The Summa Theologica*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.
- Aristotle. (2009). *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barlow, T.T. (1999). The Fox and the Lion: Machiavelli Replies to Cicero. *History of Political Thought*, 20(4), 627-645.
- Belliotti, R.A. (2009). *Niccolò Machiavelli: The Laughing Lion and the Strutting Fox*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Benner, E. (2009). *Machiavelli's Ethics*. Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Benner, E. (2013). *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brunello, R.A. (2019). The Measure of Machiavelli. *World Affairs*, 182(4), 324-349.
- Cicero. (1928). *De Officiis*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.
- Ciliberto, M. (2022). *Niccolò Machiavelli. Ragione e pazzia*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Clark, S. (2008). The Doctrine of the Lesser Evil. *The Foundations*, 59, 3-16.
- Clarke, M.T. (2021). *Machiavelli: Menace to Societas*. In: D.J. Kapust, G. Remer (eds.), *The Ciceronian Tradition in Political Theory*, 86-102. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Colish, M. (1978). Cicero's De Officiis and Machiavelli's The Prince. *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 9(4), 80-93.
- Costigliolo, M. (2022). *Metafora e trasformazione. Una lettura del Principe di Machiavelli*. Limena: Libreria universitaria.
- Del Lucchese, F. (2022). *Tumulti e indignatio. Conflitto, diritto e moltitudine in Machiavelli e Spinoza*. Milano: Mimesis.
- Desiderio, G. (2022). *Machiavelli e il liberalismo*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.
- Fournel, L.J. (2014). Is The Prince Really a Political Treatise? A Discussion of Machiavelli's Motivations for Writing The Prince. *Italian culture*, 32(2), 85-97.
- Gillespie, M. (2017). *Machiavelli's Modernity and the Christian Tradition*. In: M. Rohlf (ed.), *The Modern Turn*, 13-35. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Giorgini, G. (2013). Five Hundred Years of Italian Scholarship on Machiavelli's "Prince". *The Review of Politics*, 75(4), 625-640.
- Hankins, J. (2014). Machiavelli, Civic Humanism, and the Humanist Politics of Virtue. *Italian culture*, 32(2), 98-109.
- Machiavelli, N. (2014). *The Prince [Il principe, 1532]*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Quadlioni, D. (2014). Machiavelli, the Prince and the Idea of Justice. *Italian culture*, 32(2), 110-121.



---

**MINDAUGAS STOŠKUS**

Vilniaus universitetas

(Vilnius University, Lithuania)

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8947-0380>

[mindaugas.stoskus@fsf.vu.lt](mailto:mindaugas.stoskus@fsf.vu.lt)

DOI 10.21697/spch.2023.59.A.02



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. (CC BY-ND 4.0).

Received: 05/01/2023. Reviewed: 20/02/2023. Accepted: 30/03/2023.