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He first read Machiavelli and his fellow realists as an IR Research Scholar. He may or may not have imagined himself talking to Machiavelli during the course of writing this paper—usually with the Florentine mocking him.

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Necessity as Virtue in the Thought of Machiavelli

Abstract

The concept of necessity underpins the politics and philosophy of Machiavelli. How (and how often) the statesman or prince appeals to necessity reflects the character of politics insofar as it reveals the extremity of politics—what sort of exceptional situations exist, and especially what sorts of consequences are deemed unacceptable. For Machiavelli, the extreme situation or worst case scenario is to be expected in everything, and appropriate measures must always be taken as remedies, even or especially in quiet times. The worst must therefore be expected in human nature, and consequently necessity must substitute for virtue in the people by forcing them to be good (for the state, the prince, or both), and virtue for the prince consists in having the prudence to lay necessity down on his countrymen. Finally, and on a grander scale, necessity lies at the heart of Machiavelli’s conception of the nature of history insofar as the rise and fall of states is a necessary or inevitable phenomenon—but it is Machiavelli’s necessity to convince his potential princes that the ephemeral political life is superior to the eternal pursuits of the mind or soul.

Zachary J. Witlin
PS 145: Sullivan
About this paper:

This was a seminar paper in Professor Sullivan’s senior course on Machiavelli, in which we read and discussed in depth virtually every passage in the Florentine’s major works—*The Prince*, the *Discourses on Livy*, and his great comedy the *Mandragola*. I chose to write on necessity as a running theme in Machiavelli’s thought, one that I did find discussed in the literature on Machiavelli, but which was rarely featured as a central topic (as a topic in contemporary political philosophy in general, I believe concern for necessity is just as rare). Necessity interests me first because it defines the limits of political theory’s or philosophy’s influence on political practice or reality, and second because it clarifies the character or dignity of political practice (the harsh lives of the tribal nomads versus the luxuries of the lively city). Besides, Machiavelli’s famous claim that a prince must learn how not to be good and to use or not use such knowledge according to necessity justifies any examination of the concept—why is it that necessity should always trump goodness?

We in the seminar were expected to engage with the secondary literature on Machiavelli, but the focus was to remain on the texts themselves—hence my sources are not as numerous as those that ought to be found in a typical political science research paper. The paper was also written under the assumption that the reader would be familiar with the texts in question. In addition to the three works read in class, I consulted passages from Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*, and in one case turned to another major work of political thought to clarify an account from the histories.
Necessity is the choice you do not have. To say that a decision is necessary is to say it must be done in order to accomplish some end; to say necessity has compelled you is to absolve yourself of blame for doing something that—had you been able to choose—might bring about reproach, shock, or punishment. To appeal to necessity is to cite exceptional circumstances, a situation that entails unacceptable consequences should you fail to act accordingly. Killing is impermissible; killing one who is about to kill you might be considered necessary and therefore excusable. Killing one who you suspect may decide to kill you in the future, however, is another story: calling that necessity requires accepting the possibility of a threat as unacceptable. In short, how (and how often) the statesman or prince appeals to necessity reflects the character of politics insofar as it reveals the extremity of politics—what sort of exceptional situations exist, and especially what sorts of consequences are deemed unacceptable.

That is why the question of necessity in the thought of Niccolò Machiavelli—a man variously called a republican, a patriot, a scientist, a Christian, and a devil—reveals much about his values and his brand of politics (and which of these adjectives most fits him). The whole of his teaching rests on necessity as virtue: necessity as a substitute for virtue for the people, and virtue as the ability to impose necessity upon all others for the prince and those who would become princes. Traditionally the quality of moral excellence, virtue for Machiavelli means forcing or being forced to be good by depriving men of the ability to choose anything but that which is good. Much of the good for Machiavelli is the preservation and longevity of the state. Machiavelli therefore believed it was up to those few exceptional individuals with the virtue to pursue the good of the state without the compulsion of necessity to lay the foundations to force others to be good, either by codifying necessities into law or by exploiting emergencies that
necessarily lie beyond law to their advantage (every crisis is, for Machiavelli, a good opportunity).\(^1\),\(^2\)

To accomplish this, Machiavelli often treats necessity as a synonym for inevitability: the prince must do this; this situation cannot be avoided. The truth is that little in Machiavelli’s thought happens of necessity or inevitably—he must teach his princes and those who are not princes but deserve to be what necessity means and how to confront it, since the dominant Christian and Greek teachings of his time did not sufficiently understand the issue. This is not to say, however, that the little that might be inevitable in his thought is not of the greatest consequence, for Machiavelli intimates that history may necessarily follow a cyclical pattern of ruin and renewal. Yet even this sort of inevitability may be challenged for Machiavelli, who suggests that appropriating the necessities that history has imposed by accident and making them controllable can allow men and states to reach ever greater heights: “whoever wishes to see what has to be considers what has been,” and then some (\(D\) III.43, p.302). He confuses the serious reader’s understanding of compulsion and inevitability in order to reveal the virtues and limitations of necessity. It is virtuous because believing one has no other choice forces men to act in accordance with some end that they might not have the foresight to choose (preferably one that helps the state), and it is limited first because someone must be above compulsion—the

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\(^2\) Note that throughout this essay I refer to “men” and use the male pronoun. I do so because in describing political actors, Machiavelli specifically referred to males, and it is important to preserve the gender distinction in his thought. For a respected study of gender in Machiavelli, see Hannah F. Pitkin, Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
virtuous prince must know what to make necessary and unnecessary for the many who lack
virtue—but secondly because human power may only control so much.

Put succinctly, those virtues permit a state to hold fortune—the force of chance that may
bring glory just as easily as ruin—at bay, and thereby maximize its longevity, in three ways.
First, necessity substitutes for virtue in human beings by compelling them to act boldly and risk
themselves for the goodness of the state. Second, necessity is not merely a compulsion, but
coercion: a founder or legislator may study the histories to find all the ways in which necessity
imposed by accident brought about good effects to the state and then strip fortune of its power by
ordering those necessities into laws, or at least some established order. Finally, and most
significantly, necessity ordered into law bears the most promise of maintaining a perpetual
republic, one that will not crumble after so many years into the annals of history.3 Ordered
necessities ensure a constant and controlled stream of benefits to the longevity and power of the
state; when the time does come when ordered necessities begin to falter, the virtuous individual
must renew the foundations of the state. He does so by returning the state to a moment of
maximum necessity, since all states for Machiavelli—especially Rome—are founded under the
extremities of violence that extend beyond the rule of law. Machiavelli’s imagined perpetual
republic becomes a new Roman empire in constant harmony with the virtues of Romulus the
founder, maintained by orders that can always impose the necessities that made the first Romans

3 Machiavelli introduces the Discourses by promising to bring about new modes and orders in the affairs of politics
by rekindling interest in the ancients (I.Pr, p.5-6), before revealing in the second book that the present times may
offer the opportunity to improve upon the ancient model (II.Pr., pp.123-25), before finally revealing—quite
casually—the possibility that a republic is not doomed by nature or accident to rise and fall but may, with the
proper renewal of its foundations and virtue, last perpetually (III.17, p.257; III.22, p.266).
virtuous—in short, a state in which the extreme case becomes ordinary (I.19.1, p.52). By permeating his account of politics with necessity, Machiavelli makes princes take their bearings from the extreme situation. Politics for Machiavelli becomes war by other means.

But as for the limits of necessity (or perhaps the boundary between the necessity that may be mastered by men and genuine inevitability): Machiavelli makes very clear that human things rise and fall in a timeless cycle, even as he urges statesman to keep themselves on top for as long as they possibly can: relative power always shifts among states, even if particular statesman do not wish it to be so. Examining Machiavelli’s project of perpetuity—the new modes and orders he promises that are really improvements upon old modes and orders—gives one the sense that he may have sought to maximize the longevity of the state without wishing to make his own doubts about the chance of actually attaining perpetuity known to his intended readers (D D.L., p.3; I.pr., p.5). Painting the background of all human life as an uphill battle against ruination from within or without could motivate a potential prince to push the rock of Sisyphus by appealing to the historical necessity to preserve the state. But it may also encourage more intellectual readers—the kind best able to cultivate the intellectual virtue of prudence—to value the things of the world less by knowing that all comes to an end regardless, and choose a life of leisure over a life of action. To this reader Machiavelli appeals to the superiority of the life in accordance with nature, but he also appeals to the idea that effectual truth—the truth of

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4 Romulus, it must be remembered, could not found the state until he not only defeated the previous king, but also killed his brother Remus.

5 This relates to one of the core ideas of neo- or structural realism. Power distributions in an international system always shift into a balance, but because the balance is never the same across all of history, it follows that states must rise and fall in power in order to produce a new balance. See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman, “Introduction: Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy,” in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
something’s utility, or at least its effect on reality—is superior to abstract or philosophical truth. He just does not want people thinking too hard about their place in the cosmos.⁶

**Machiavelli’s State of Necessity**

Machiavelli first and foremost grounds the concept of necessity in an understanding of human nature. On the one hand, people are greedy and ambitious: they have a “natural and ordinary” desire to acquire, and they are “so unquiet that however little the door to ambition is opened for them, they at once forget every love” (P III, p.14; D III.21.4, p.264). On the other hand, they are also lazy, licentious and concerned with their own wants. The first two traits are potentially useful for a free state, whose ends are acquisition and self-preservation (D I.29.3). But since men never work any good except through necessity (I.3.2, p.15), and the good for Machiavelli is the common good—meaning the state and other things which “will bring common benefit to everyone” (I.pr.1, p.5)—then the common good rests on necessity.

But what is that? “Necessity,” Mansfield explains, “refers to what is humanly necessary, as opposed to what is necessary for the fulfillment of human nature. Necessity thereby becomes an abstraction floating free from what man is and what he is for; it becomes an excuse for the acquisition of necessities regardless of morality. Necessity is what seems necessary to human survival, without much thought about what in humanity deserves to survive.”⁷ To put it more generally, necessity is a force that makes men act regardless of, or in spite of, their volition or

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⁶ Though there may be a grain of truth to the contention of Anthony J. Parel that “Machiavelli did study politics in terms of both human motions... and in terms of natural or occult motions that operate in nature and in the cosmos,” his overarching concern is with the extent to which human motions could supersede those of any extra-human force. Anthony J. Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 1

⁷ I refer to Mansfield often on this subject because English studies of necessity in Machiavelli are surprisingly difficult to come by, and because his analysis is so useful. I must add that necessity for Machiavelli extends beyond mere survival, though perhaps not beyond the real or material world in which mere survival is won. Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.55.
sense of right and wrong. It is stimulus and response, and though one may reason on how best to meet necessity, it is necessity that chooses what is to be met at all.

Mansfield is able to draw this conclusion in large part from Machiavelli’s discussion of the beginnings of cities, with which he begins the *Discourses*. Here Machiavelli sets down several axioms, the first being that the virtue of the founder may be recognized both in the choice of site and in the ordering of the laws. To this axiom Machiavelli adds another: “men work either by necessity or by choice, and… there is greater virtue to be seen where choice has less authority.” The choice and virtue of Romulus come from choosing necessity, or rather, choosing to limit choice for the subjects of Romulus. At a minimum, we may see here that necessity is not necessarily imposed, but may also be the product of prudence, a virtue in and of itself that must discern necessity. The founder’s choice is whether to select a barren site to keep men rough and industrious, or to choose a fertile site and risk them becoming idle and soft. But Machiavelli explains that “if men were content to live off their own and did not wish to seek to command others,” a barren site would be wise. “Men,” however, “cannot secure themselves without power,” and a fertile site will be needed to support a growing population as Rome—or any city that might imitate Rome—expands (I.1.4-5, pp.8-9).

The solution to the dilemma comes in ordering the laws, the second way a founder shows his virtue which turns out to depend on the first. “The laws should be ordered to constrain [the idleness of the site] by imposing such necessities as the site does not provide.” The site will not constrain men to work hard, exercise, and train to be soldiers, but the threat of punishment will. And, as a taste of things to come, Machiavelli informs us that necessity ordered by law can permit excellent men to rise in a city, and the necessities ordered by Romulus and Numa and
their successors made Rome a great empire and prevented its corruption for some time (*D* I.1.4-5, pp.8-9).

We may immediately note several things here. First, when the necessity that constrains men to virtuous action comes not from founders or princes but from enemies or circumstances (sites not exempted), Machiavelli calls it for all intents and purposes an act of fortune or chance, for if that necessity ever changes it will not necessarily be controllable by princes. The decision to wrest necessity from fortune and impose necessity through law as legal coercion reflects Machiavelli’s axiom at the start of *The Prince*: states are acquired by your arms or others’, by virtue or fortune (*P* I, p.6). Harmony among seemingly disparate texts aside, we must note that this remains a guiding principle of Machiavelli’s doctrine of imposing necessity by law in the *Discourses*. One must study the histories to understand what accidents may arise, and order measures to prevent them so far as possible. A republic that seeks “the perfect and true end” must have “a perfection of order,” and while “accidents led to [Rome’s] perfection,” this need not be the case in a state yet to be founded that takes Rome as its model for imitation (*D* I.2.1-7, pp.10-14).

A cryptic line of thought starting in this second chapter demonstrates the importance of ordering remedies to preempt fortune’s accidents. Machiavelli writes that while all republics are governed (by themselves or others) in an endless cycle of regime change, were a republic to pass through these changes it would either stand on its head rather than its feet or be conquered by an enemy. Presumably, then, if someone were to find a way to break the cycle of regime change while maintaining the strength to defeat neighboring powers, it would not be defeated but would stand perpetually, if on its head at one moment and its feet the next. We are told in this passage that Rome reached perfection by being mixed, or more specifically by virtue of the disunion of
the plebs and the Senate—which of course turned Rome upon its head and vice versa (I.2.1-7, pp.10-14; on Rome turned upside down, I.37.1, p.79). Rome, however, fell: there must be a third option to the formula, since we know from history that Rome could not be conquered from without before rotting from within. Machiavelli’s implication is that the fall did not come from the disunion of the plebs, or the cycling among regimes, or its weakness: the proper orders were in place to permit these things. It fell because it could not maintain these orders, and these orders could not be maintained because no exceptional or extraordinary orders existed to deal with the accidents and changes of circumstances that eroded the foundations.

Such an extraordinary order requires returning to a state of maximum necessity and forcing the renewal of the foundations. This is so because the founder of these orders cannot predict everything, but he can predict human nature—and he can manipulate it. “It is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it.” If a malignity hides for a hidden cause, which is not recognized due to its unfamiliarity, it will be exposed later by time, “the father of every truth” (I.3.1, p.15). That is why studying history allows people to learn from past disorders, and provides the opportunity to do it better next time around. The prince must be educated in this brand of virtue, and Machiavelli gives special care to that question.

Mansfield rightly notes that the relationship between necessity and virtue crescendos in the Discourses. First we are told that greater virtue is seen where choice has less authority; then that “men never work any good unless through necessity, but where choice abounds and one can make use of license, at once everything is full of confusion and disorder… hunger and poverty

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8 Mansfield, p. 15.
make men industrious, and laws make them good” (I.3.2, p.15). Then the verdict becomes “necessity produces virtue, as we have often said” (we did not quite say so) (II.12, p.153).

Finally, in discussing the prudence of a captain who imposes every kind of necessity upon his soldiers while depriving necessity from his enemies, Machiavelli explains “how useful is necessity to human actions and to what glory they have been led by it. As it has been written by certain moral philosophers, the hands and tongue of men—two very noble instruments for ennobling him—would not have worked perfectly nor led human works to the height they are seen to be led to had they not been driven by necessity. Thus… the virtue of necessity was known by the ancient captains of armies” (III.12.1, p.246).9 Necessity substitutes for Machiavelli’s virtue because while the virtuous possess prudence and are able to discern the lesser of all evils and choose the least worst as good, to anticipate future floods and counter them with dikes and dams, prudence is rare, and the majority of men need only be made to act in a certain way by a prudent orderer (P III, p.12; XIII, p.57; XXI, p.91; XXV, p.99). This is why prudence is superior to ferocity, the fox more important than the lion, despite Machiavelli’s 50-50 division in his famous chapter of The Prince (XV, pp. 98-101). The impetuous and audacious are like the French military: fury and impetuosity are not virtues without orders to direct those passions (see D III.36, p.292, where Machiavelli describes the futile French in the same terms he casts those who conquer Fortuna by beating her down). Good orders are founded by the prudent; Machiavelli’s lions are controlled by his foxes.

But how shall the prudent know to order? Most instances of the term “necessary” in Machiavelli’s work refer to individuals judging or recognizing necessity based around a certain

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9 As an aside, the premises here extend beyond the conclusion: necessity, it seems, drives the tongues of those responsible for the all heights of human achievement. Perhaps the moral philosophers who taught Machiavelli this doctrine were themselves driven by necessity to take up their pens.
end, meaning that other necessities could be judged besides that which saves or enhances the state, or any other apparent interest. Could one not argue that it is necessary to spurn material wealth for spiritual study, to prize ethics over the interests of the state? To judge among many possible necessities, and especially to prevent from judging moral necessities, Machiavelli must deprive prudence, the virtue of judgment, of its moral element—“to many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you,” or reasoning about what is good pales before the reality’s pressing concerns (I.7.4, p.23). Machiavelli announces his project of raising the idea of necessity above the study of moral or philosophic reasoning in the famous 15th chapter of *The Prince*, in which the Florentine declares the works of all those philosophers who came before him—those who imagined states that have not never been seen or recorded—to be utterly useless. Those thinkers taught men to let go of reality for ideals, and their students learned their ruin rather than their preservation. Machiavelli sought to break from these thinkers by doing something useful and turning directly to the “effectual truth” of the matter, the truth about what modes and governments teach men their preservation. The effectual truth of the matter is that what is good and not good is a matter of necessity, and at bottom, only necessity (*P XV*, p.61).

*That* necessity is grounded in the preservation of the state, with the implication that all doctrines of right and wrong depend entirely on necessity as security. Hence Machiavelli lists pairs of virtues and vices, confusing their order so we do not know which is which, before concluding that the virtue of prudence consists in knowing how to avoid the infamy of those vices that take the state from the prince. The prince should not care about the infamy of vices without which it is difficult to save one’s state. Machiavelli concludes that “if one considers

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10 The instances are far too numerous to cite here, but for a shocking example of judging what is necessary, consider “there is no remedy more powerful, nor more valid, more secure, and more necessary than to kill the sons of Brutus,” (I.16.4, p.45). I doubt this is even the most shocking, but it makes the point well enough.
everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one’s
ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one’s security and well-
being” (P XV, p.62). Things only appear to be vices if they protect the state at the expense of
ordinary morals. If the state needs it, nothing is forbidden.11

**The Extremity of Machiavelli’s Necessity**

Virtue for Machiavelli consists (at least at its heart) of developing prudence for the sake
of the necessity of security, even or especially at the expense of morality. If one is to understand
the full import of Machiavelli’s revaluation of virtue, it is first critical to understand the
*frequency* of the state’s necessities— whether harsh remedies must be reserved for rare and
supreme emergencies or whether they must be exercised each and every day. I answer on two
counts. Not only are necessities that seem extraordinary to the innocent reader quite ordinary to
Machiavelli, but if necessity as ordered coercion is to be the device by which a republic reaches
for perpetuity, a prudent prince must consistently return a state to the necessities of the moment
of founding as a means of rebirthing the state and staving off its otherwise inevitable decline. On
the second count, Machiavelli explains at the start of the third book of the *Discourses* that all
worldly things have a limit to their life, and that “in the process of time [a state’s] goodness is
corrupted, [and] unless something intervenes to lead it back to the mark, it of necessity kills that
body.” This occurs because after ten years at most men begin to corrupt, to behave with greater
danger and more tumult, to transgress the laws, and to do so in a manner that makes it unsafe to
punish them…“unless something arises by which punishment is brought back to their memory

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11 On the radical nature of Machiavelli’s revaluation, Orwin notes that “whatever politics demands is virtuous. The
touchstone for pretended virtue is its contribution to our security and well-being.” I question whether the word
“well-being” is generous to Machiavelli. Clifford Orwin, “Machiavelli’s Unchristian Charity,” *American Political
Science Review*, vol. 72, no. 4 (Dec. 1978), p. 1218
and fear is renewed in their spirits, soon so many delinquents join together that they can no longer be punished without danger.” The return to the beginnings of a republic comes either by extrinsic accident or internal prudence, and the preferred Machiavellian option ought to be clear: either good orders or good men must produce the effect (III.1.1-6, pp.209-12).

In fact, this discussion has occurred before, in the first book of the *Discourses*: this was merely the renewal. In discussing the dangers of allowing a weak king to succeed a great founder of a kingdom, Machiavelli wrote that if the weak successor either lives long or fails to be succeeded by one as virtuous as the founder, “the kingdom of necessity comes to ruin.” Unless, of course, it has ancient orders that maintain the kingdom; good orders can almost always compensate for human defects because they impose the necessities that most people will not choose to address themselves (I.19.1-2, pp.52-53). And even before this discussion, Machiavelli writes that a people will become corrupt and over time ruined if there fails to be good succession of leaders… “unless indeed he makes it be reborn with many dangers and much blood” (*D* I.17.3, p.48). In book III.1, Machiavelli addresses the more specific problem of failing orders as distinct from failing successions. His solution is a return to the original, desperate state of necessity, where the risk of being crushed by an enemy, internal or otherwise, is real, and people are made to see before their eyes the common good the state provides through the blood that runs at the threshold of the state’s dominion (on enemies at the founding, see *D* I.6.4, p.23; on needing to see it to believe it, see *P* VI, pp.23-24).

Machiavelli’s remedies to treat necessity themselves have an extraordinary character. Consider Machiavelli’s comments on war. It is popular right now to speak of wars of necessity as distinct from wars of choice, but Machiavelli teaches prudent leaders to believe they rarely have a choice but to make war. All men naturally and ordinarily desire to acquire (*P* III, p.14)
and what one acquires does not seem secure to men without acquiring still more (D I.5.4, p.19).

Men wish to seek to command others, such that men cannot secure themselves except with power, and therefore must expand (D I.1, p.8). Early in the Discourses Machiavelli claims that war is made for two reasons: to seize, or out of fear of being seized. But since all things rise and fall, a necessity can always appear on the horizon that forces a republic to expand (I.6.4, p.23).

Prudence dictates that all states must be expected to expand and conquer when given the opportunity and capability, and therefore “war may not be avoided but is deferred to the advantage of others.” This is not merely a discussion of preventive war against a rising power or preemptive war against a mobilizing power, but a regard for invisible, future trouble that “all wise princes” must consider, based on the notion that “time sweeps away everything before it and can bring with it good as well as evil and evil as well as good” (P III, pp.12-13). Moreover, “it is impossible for a republic to succeed in staying quiet and enjoying its freedom and little borders… if it will not molest others, it will be molested, and from being molested will arise the wish and the necessity to acquire; and if it does not have an enemy outside, it will find one at home, as it appears necessarily happens to all great cities” (II.19, pp.172-173). What is the lesser evil: to wait for a threat, even a rising one, and then strike with difficulty and losses, or to eliminate the very possibility of threat and rely on one’s own orders to maintain the state?¹²

¹² Fischer rightly points to Machiavelli’s doctrine of security through imperial domination, despite hints to the contrary dropped in other parts of Machiavelli’s work. Fischer errs, however, in claiming that “Machiavelli’s notion of license corresponds to what contemporary students of international relations, especially those of the realist persuasion, call ‘anarchy’ and understand as the absence of central protection.” Certainly this is the rough equivalent to that conception of anarchy in Machiavelli’s thought, but Fischer fails to capture the absence of any significant distinction between domestic and international politics in the Florentine’s work. All calculations must be based in part on the proportion of force between individual agents, whether they be a prince and his people, a prince and his ministers, or princes among other princes; license permeates the state as much as it lies between states. Markus Fischer, Well-Ordered License: On the Unity of Machiavelli’s Thought (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2000), pp. 159-163.
Later in the *Discourses* Machiavelli amends the causes of war among powers to include either wars of chance or wars of ambition (*D* II.9, p.146). Wars of ambition seem to be wars of choice but are not actually so because ambition is a natural and powerful desire in all men’s breasts—these are wars to acquire and to maintain the acquisition (*D* II.6.1, p.140). Wars by chance, moreover, are *not* caused by a spiral of mutual fears and arms racing, but rather by one state deciding to surrender itself to another: by enticing an outside power to enter the war for love of gain against the expectations of either the new power or the state that up to this point had the upper hand. Chance for Machiavelli is anything beyond someone’s ability to control.

There is a third type of war that Machiavelli speaks of, when an entire people is necessitated by war or famine to occupy a new province by driving out its inhabitants. Famine certainly appears to be a necessity beyond human agency, but we have reason to believe Machiavelli is keeping his tongue in his cheek here: the first of such wars he lists in this section is the French coming to Rome after being attracted by the sweetness of the fruit and the wine of Italy (II.8.1, p.143). Moreover, fear and war keeps a republic united—it bears upon leaders to draw the remote near and maintain the republic in military orders such that constant extremes and necessities remain present (II.25, p.190). A republic will keep the plebs busy working on some glorious affair, and what is more glorious to Machiavelli than rising to empire? Finally, Machiavelli makes it clear that “what princes are necessitated to do at the beginnings of their increases, republics also are necessitated to do until they have become powerful and force alone is enough;” and the beginning of a kingdom is a state of necessity (*D* II.13.2, p.155). Republics must imitate the kingdom of imperious necessities, even before they must be renewed by returning to it.
Hence Machiavelli teaches his princes to have no other concern but the art of war, and to exercise that art more in peace than in actual conflict (P XIV, pp.58-59). Virtue began in the *Discourses* by appearing to be the use of prudence to order laws to make men good and maintain the state; it now appears to be prudence in the preparation and waging of war. This only appears to be a contradiction: war for Machiavelli is both a material and metaphysical concept that can apply equally to the laws of the state and its captains. War therefore lies at the bottom of Machiavelli’s necessities: war is part of the nature of necessity because it is part of nature as a whole. Machiavelli’s metaphysic of war therefore may explain the Florentine’s views on the place of necessity or inevitability in all of human history, a concept important both for defining the limits of his project and for convincing certain readers to sign on to a Machiavellian education.

**Necessity and the Nature of History**

Mansfield rightly explains that “the themes of nature, fortune, and necessity for which [Machiavelli] is famous… are the nonpolitical considerations necessary to his politics because they discern the limits of what politics can obtain.”13 It is fitting, then, that we examine the limits or extremes of Machiavelli’s politics, since Machiavelli takes his bearings from those very necessities, the extreme cases. Understanding these limits is critical for understanding the nature of Machiavelli’s theory because it sets in the sharpest possible relief the extent to which he may justify his teachings. Machiavelli may have founded modern statism or realism, but it is difficult to accept his love for the state without understanding how he justifies the state.14 While we might

13 Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, p. xxxvii

14 Meinecke famously credits Machiavelli as “the man with whom the history of the idea of raison d’état in the modern Western world begins.” Moreover, Meinecke maintains that while Machiavelli’s German critics “have noticed that he fails to express any opinion about the real final purpose of the State,” he nonetheless reflected on the subject. In fact, Meinecke claims “his whole life was bound up with a definite supreme purpose of the State,”
point to the state as necessary for security or self-preservation in his thought, we still could not understand the extent to which Machiavelli demolishes ethics or demands readiness for war without considering the possibility of an appeal beyond necessity. Machiavelli must set that necessity against a larger understanding of nature, human or otherwise. He accomplishes this most convincingly in his discussion of history.

Machiavelli makes two central claims that ground the rest of his thought. First, all things pass between the poles of motion and rest, of war and peace, and nature rewards those things that are more active and warlike. One might even say that rest or idleness is unnatural in some sense. Second, history itself is subject to the natural law of motion and rest, reflected most strongly by the rise and fall of states. From these two claims, we may extract a third that bears on Machiavelli’s political teaching, and perhaps on our modern understanding of political science: since all things are subject to motion and rest, any maxims that attempt to cast universal rules may only do so in the most general cases, such that these rules cannot act as predictors or codes of conduct for all particular situations, but rather as guides informed by an understanding of history. But if Machiavelli cannot provide rules for all situations, he seems to accept both a limit to his knowledge and a certain inability to completely bend circumstances or fortune through prudence or ferocity. He admits (without needing, or perhaps wanting, to say so explicitly) that his realism rests on a certain recognition of human limits even as he seeks to expand those very limits. So too does his reticence on the issue imply a difficulty in definitively justifying the state: the substitute for justification is the constant necessity of self-preservation, but as to what end one must preserve oneself, Machiavelli does not say and does not invite his students to think

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and “his whole political way of thought is nothing else but a continual process of thinking about raison d’état.”
about. Either potential princes will be satisfied with satiating the passions that Machiavelli attributes to human nature, or they rest content choosing the primacy of effectual rather than moral truth.

First, Machiavelli weaves his commentary on the motion-rest dichotomy of nature into the rest of his discussions, such that we must piece them together with some effort. In the preface to the second book of the *Discourses* (the book nominally devoted to the acquisition of Rome’s empire), Machiavelli explains that “since human things are always in motion, either they ascend or they descend.” A province will increase toward its best by virtue of it founder or giver of orders until eventually “the time has come for it to descend toward its worst side” (*D* II.pr., p. 124). Elsewhere he writes in the negative that these human things “cannot stay steady,” and must therefore rise and fall because we cannot stop them from doing so (*D* I.6.4, p.22).

Machiavelli would have his readers believe that such motion is natural, since “all our actions imitate nature” (II.3, p.134): men act like birds of prey, and are urged by nature to catch their prey (I.40.7, p.89); “we are unable to oppose that to which nature inclines us” (III.9.3, p. 240).15 Machiavelli occasionally speaks of motion as a synonym for war or conflict and rest or steadiness for its opposite (*P* XIX, p.72). The arts of war in Machiavelli’s thought are consistent with motion, and corruption with rest. Idleness rots (II.20, p. 176), and an education that directs men toward passivity—e.g. Christianity—cultivates an idleness that does evil to the state and bears some responsibility for state weakness (I.pr., p. 6). An education founded on a religion that

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15 It is worth noting that Machiavelli uses nature both in the sense of something eternal and independent of human creation and in the sense of a person’s way or habits. He is able to confuse the two because Machiavelli is not concerned with where such things come from, but with how they affect things. He may also not have truly believed that nature itself pushes one toward a certain way of acting, but even if it is a rhetorical device it works in favor of Machiavelli’s prescription. It is enough to remember that for Machiavelli, human nature does not change even if customs and habits do: “the variation in their mode of proceeding arises not from a diverse nature—because it is in one mode in all” (*D* I.58.3, p. 117). For an example of the latter sense of the word, see *D* I.41, p. 90.
makes peoples esteem less the honor of the world deprives men of ferocity and weakens them (II.2.2, p. 131).

Nature, on the other hand, compels men to desire to acquire (P III, p.14) and this desire must be cultivated by a good founder of cities. Machiavelli explains in the first chapter of the Discourses that men are not content to live off their own and seek to command others, and that men cannot secure themselves without power (I.1.4, p. 8). If a republic is to reach its “perfect and true end,” it must be ordered for war (D I.2.1, p. 10), and its princes must make the arts of war their only concern and never be idle in times of peace (P XIV, p. 58-59). If a founder fails to order his state to prepare for expansion or war, he leaves the people weak and vulnerable to attack, or provides the idleness that allows ambitious citizens to seize power—a founder cannot balance all the demands of political things, making impossible “the true quiet of a city” as the true political way of life (DI.6.4, p.23). Not only must prudent leaders of well ordered states not interrupt the orders of war in times of peace (D I.21.2, p. 55), but they must “crush [their enemies] with the arts of peace.” Idleness and peace bring disunion, fear and war its opposite (D II.25.1, p.190). Idleness breeds disease and corruption, while necessity forces men to act virtuously and maintains a unified and healthy state. In fact, the very state in Machiavelli’s thought is a condition of dominion and empire; the arts of war are therefore in its nature (P I, p. 5). In short, nature by necessity imposes change for better or for worse on men, and men are better off insofar as they impose those changes themselves rather than leaving their fortunes to chance. The life in accordance to nature is warlike, and the true study of nature—the study upon which all other studies must rest—is the art of war. Nature’s necessity must be imitated.
As for history, Machiavelli most clearly articulates his views at the beginning of book V of the *Florentine Histories* (precisely in the middle of the work). The passage merits quotation at length.

*Usually provinces go most of the time, in the changes they make, from order to disorder and then pass again from disorder to order, for worldly things are not allowed by nature to stand still. As soon as they reach their ultimate perfection, having no further to rise, they must descend; and similarly, once they have descended and through their disorders arrived at the ultimate depth, since they cannot descend further, of necessity they must rise. Thus they are always descending from good to bad and rising from bad to good. For virtue gives birth to quiet, quiet to leisure, leisure to disorder, disorder to ruin; and similarly, from ruin, order is born; from order, virtue; and from virtue, glory and good fortune.*

(FH V.1, p.185)

We can immediately see that Machiavelli weaves together the disparate comments he makes throughout the *Discourses* and *The Prince* on the motion of human things and the rise and fall of nations. He appears at first glance to posit a natural cycle here, a direction that history follows by necessity. Looking more carefully, though, it seems that the stages in the two legs of the cycle are inconsistent. At first Machiavelli describes a passage from virtue to quiet to leisure to disorder to ruin; but he ends his cycle by claiming that from virtue comes glory and good fortune. Do glory and good fortune give birth to quiet?

We might read this in two ways. First, Machiavelli makes clear elsewhere the dangers of a long peace. Cyrus founded his kingdom by virtue of the long peace of the Medes, which made them “soft and effeminate” (*P* XI, p.23). In the discussion of conspiracies in *The Prince*,

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16 It is Strauss who notes that this passage appears directly at the center of the eight chapter history, the suggestion being (I suppose) that this discussion lies at the heart of the work. His comments come not on Machiavelli’s discussion of the cycle of history, but for the discussion of the life of letters that immediately follows in this section. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 33

Machiavelli explains that the two fears of a prince come from his external enemies or from his own subjects, and “when things outside are not moving, one has to fear that they may be conspiring secretly” (P XIX, p.72-73). The absence of external enemies grants the opportunity for the ambitious to overthrow their regime, or more generally, peace gives opportunity for dissension and disunity. Referring to the cycle, we may infer that once a province has risen to greatness by conquering its neighbors, it necessarily enters a period of peace or quiet. When dangers are far on the horizon, men become ungrateful and insolent, and ambition—“for men are so unquiet that however little the door to ambition is opened for them, they at once forget every love that they had placed in the prince because of his humanity”—gains more room to express itself (D III.22.4, pp.263-4). Without the necessity to defend the state and stay united that external enemies bring, the glory and good fortune endowed by virtue eventually lead to disorder, and possibly to ruin (on unity and external enemies see D II.26, p. 190; on the ungratefulness and wickedness of men, see P XVII, pp.66-67).

Secondly, we might impose consistency on the passage by giving virtue two meanings. The first instance of virtue refers to the military strength that enables a state to conquer its enemies or neighbors. The second, however, may refer to the virtue of a founder who orders the mechanisms of the state—Machiavelli, after all, does not precede the first instance of virtue with order, but he does for the second. Such an emphasis places a great deal of importance on such an individual, whose orders will be responsible in large part for the military virtue and longevity of the state (recall the example of the fox and the French above). It also casts Machiavelli’s discussion of perpetual republics in sharp relief. In one place, Machiavelli concludes rather hastily that “it is impossible to order a perpetual republic, because its ruin is caused through a thousand unexpected ways” (D III.17, p.257). Soon after, Machiavelli quips that if, perhaps, an
extraordinary individual might return the orders of a republic to their beginnings and renew their
laws, thereby returning it to ancient virtue, then he might restrain the republic from running into
ruin and make it perpetual (D III.22.3, p.266).

So what does all this have to do with Machiavelli’s teaching on necessity? Machiavelli
cannot rely on his potential students’ good will in accepting his doctrines and making their
implementation in the world possible. He must convince them of the necessity of his teaching.
He does so first by suggesting that his policies accord with the will of nature. He does so in his
discussion of history by pointing to the limits of all political things. Ruin and greatness form the
poles of political life, and all states oscillate between the two. By making his readers aware that
the risk of decline always rests on the horizon, he brings something remote and dangerous closer
to the minds of his potential princes even before embarking on the risks of warfare. It is “a
common defect of men not to take account of the storm during the calm” and to think that quiet
times can never change (P XXIV, p. 97). Moreover, “the nature of peoples is variable and it is
easy to persuade them of something, but difficult to keep them in that persuasion. And thus
things must be ordered in such a mode that when they no longer believe, one can make them
believe by force;” and necessity is that which forces a decision in favor of self-preservation or
security (P V, p.24). Being made constantly aware of the danger to the state, princes or statesmen
will act as though a necessity always rests upon them.  

I believe that Machiavelli has a special concern in presenting his view of history in this
manner. He is writing, partly in The Prince, especially in the Discourses, and exclusively in the

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18 Evrigenis argues that Machiavelli lays the groundwork for this tactic in Hobbes, renewing the fear of destruction
by pulling the individual back into the violence of the state of nature before the security of society, thereby
keeping him dedicated to the necessities of state preservation. Ioannis D. Evrigenis, “Hobbes’s Clockwork: The
State of Nature and Machiavelli’s Return to the Beginnings of Cities,” in The Arts of Rule: Essays in Honor of Harvey
pp.195-97.
Florentine Histories to intellectuals or men of letters. If there are three sorts of brains, one that understands by itself, another that discerns what others understand, and the last that does not understand at all, then the kind Machiavelli is most concerned about is the first “most excellent” kind of brain (P XXII, p.92). Certainly a prince with the second, good-enough sort of brain need only understand Machiavelli’s well-reasoned advice on particulars in order to profit from his work, but the first, most excellent sort of brain can quite possibly understand everything that Machiavelli knows about human affairs, and would therefore be able to discern the weaknesses and limits of Machiavelli’s thought. But Machiavelli needs to convince this sort of reader precisely because he has the greatest potential: “it is a more prudent choice to settle in a fertile place.” What remains is for that site to be restrained within proper limits by laws. Laws, of course, are little more to Machiavelli than the imposition of necessity by human agency (D I.1.5, p.9). Founding Machiavelli’s doctrine of realism on the most fertile group of students means convincing those who are hardest to convince of the necessity of his project.

Machiavelli intimates this is his concern in the Florentine Histories in the very same passage in which he describes the rise and fall of states—in fact, he does so immediately following this description, or perhaps as part of his description.

Whence it has been observed by the prudent that letters come after arms and that, in provinces and cities, captains arise before philosophers. For, as good and ordered armies give birth to victories and victories to quiet, the strength of well-armed spirits cannot be corrupted by a more honorable leisure than that of letters, nor can leisure enter into well-instituted cities with a greater and more dangerous deceit than this one. This was best understood by Cato when the philosophers Diogenes and Carneades, sent by Athens as spokesmen to the Senate, came to Rome. When he saw how the Roman youth was beginning to follow them about with admiration, and since he recognized the evil that could result to his fatherland from this honorable leisure, he saw to it that no philosopher could be accepted into Rome. Thus, provinces come by these means to ruin; when they have arrived there and men have become wise from their afflictions, they return, as was said, to order unless they remain suffocated by an extraordinary force.
When danger is far, people have time to pause and reflect. A man of letters or philosopher may at this time deem the quiet life of the mind superior to the life of action—a dangerous preference for rest over motion. These gentlemen “live idly in abundance… without having any care either for cultivation or for other necessary trouble in living” (D I.55.4, p.111). A man of letters might look at the rise and fall of states, the passing from ash to ash and dust to dust, and decide it is not worth his time to get involved in political things: he won’t “labor and strain/ to make, with a thousand discomforts, a work/ which the wind will spoil and the fog cover over” (Mandragola Prologue, p.11). He may choose the honorable leisure of philosophy (to say nothing of the attractions of the “ambitious idleness” of Christianity) over the life of a captain (D I.pr., p.6). Hence Machiavelli reminds the readers of his history that captains come before philosophers, and in fact the latter depend upon the former. But constant necessities demand constant captains, and Machiavelli needs those with the greatest potential to choose the arts of war over philosophy.

The specific nature of the incident Machiavelli describes and partly conceals sheds light on the problem. Carneades was the head of the Academy in Athens at the time and a giant in the school of skepticism, a mode of thought that emphasized uncertainty, especially in questions of ethics. In Rome, Carneades gave two speeches on two days. First he spoke of justice and its virtues, apparently pleasing his listeners as much as could be expected. On the second day he

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gave precisely the opposite speech on the follies of justice, scandalizing the city and forcing his expulsion.²⁰

The speech he gave, which he may or may not have actually believed, was what might be called the realist’s position on justice. Hugo Grotius, the founder of modern idealism in international relations and the father of modern international law, found the speech of Carneades to capture the position so perfectly that he snubbed Machiavelli by allowing Carneades to speak for all realists. First praising Carneades for his ability to use his rhetorical powers just as effectively for falsehood as for truth (without discussing how Carneades himself might have judged truth and falsehood), he paraphrases what he takes to be Carneades’s argument against justice, the argument he presumably made in Rome: “men have established *iura* according to their own interests [*pro utilitate*], which vary with different customs, and often at different times with the same people. So there is no natural *ius*: all men and the other animals are impelled by nature to seek their own interests. Consequently, either there is no justice, or if there is such a thing, it is completely irrational, since pursuing the good of others harms oneself.”²¹

The danger that someone may become *too* realist, or so aware of the absence of natural moral principles that he judges it better to look after himself apart from the state, is present in this passage from the *Florentine Histories*. Imposing necessity is well and good, but the founder who must act from beyond the dominion of the state has no necessity to substitute for his virtue. One who founds a new state must find a good reason for doing so, a justification of some sort. Yet Machiavelli still attempts to dodge the question of the justification for the state by appealing

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to necessity: the state makes your leisure possible, and founders and captains make the state possible.

Machiavelli explicitly states his need for—and his challenge in recruiting—these sorts of virtuous founders in the *Discourses*. A prudent orderer needs to be able to see inconveniences from very far away to anticipate and prevent them. Not only are such individuals rare, but because people are incredulous (*P VI*, pp.23-24) and cannot be persuaded by conjecture of future evils, they are unlikely to convince others of such evil, and must take recourse to extraordinary measures. But “because the reordering of a city for a political way of life presupposes a good man, and becoming prince of a republic by violence presupposes a bad man, one will find it very rarely happens that someone good wishes to become prince of a republic by bad ways, even though his end be good” (*D I.18.4*, p.51). This is not to say that Machiavelli cannot get around this problem somehow or another, but it underscores why Machiavelli rarely strays from the effectual truth of the matter: good men, in both morals and talent, must be taught to do evil according to the necessity of the state. He quite simply didn’t want his readers to think too hard about what makes the state justifiable either because knowledge of worldly things taught him justice depends on the tremendous task of security, or because there is no justice outside the state.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Machiavelli’s perpetual republic, if he thought such a thing even possible, would not actually be perpetual. Constant necessities and renewals destroy the orders of a republic and found new ones. All that remains is the shadow of the ancient orders (*I.25*, p.60). The perpetuity of the republic comes from the appearance or deception that little has changed, when in effect the ways of life of the republic are consistently curtailed to prevent the softness that idleness and
luxury breed—the true corruption to Machiavelli—by restoring the rough and dangerous conditions present in the birth of a republic. The necessity of that state imposes Machiavelli’s virtue on the populace, a virtue that too few people would otherwise understand, accept, or embrace. Machiavelli brings about the perpetual republic, in other words, by discovering how to make the extraordinary ordinary: by bringing the accidents always present in history under human command and teaching his princes the proper remedies. But because the perpetual republic rests upon accidents and necessities, Machiavelli cannot deny the possibility that an unfamiliar accident may trump all the wisdom drawn from history and bring down the perpetual republic after all. This is why he first introduces the perpetual republic in the conclusion of a chapter by denying its possibility due to the limits of human knowledge in predicting accidents, and why he reintroduces its possibility as a digression in the middle of a chapter by mentioning how to address those accidents: he must state the risks categorically, and whet his potential princes appetites by intimating the glory of doing the impossible.

Perpetuity through controlled destruction and renewal is not the most satisfying answer to the problem of history as Machiavelli casts it, but it is consistent with what the Florentine says in his famous chapter on fortune: she is arbiter of half our actions, and we need not deny ourselves the opportunity to resist her, and occasionally overcome her (P XXV, pp.98-101). New inconveniences really do arise all the time in politics, and it is quite simply impossible to make all the orders and institutions needed to counter them.

Machiavelli is able to convince his potential princes of the goodness of his extraordinary necessities, of the elevation of necessity from exception to rule, by appealing to this impossibility in history. All things rise and fall and have a limit to their life; would you rather bring yourself closer to a peak or leave your position in life to chance? But the Machiavellian strategy, the
marriage of virtue and necessity at the price of chance, human agency, and moral prudence bears on the tradition of political realism he helped define in the West. The more a state becomes Machiavelli’s republic of perpetual necessity, the less we are able to wonder about what makes life worth living.

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