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Machiavelli as Philosopher

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Abstract: This paper deals with Zuckert's book *Machiavelli's Politics*. It takes as its point of departure Zuckert's remark that Machiavelli is "surprisingly like Socrates." The paper begins with a brief discussion of what makes a Socratic philosopher and then charts out the many similarities between Socrates and Machiavelli. Responses are offered to some of the key reservations against terming Machiavelli a Socratic. In particular, the paper points to a less activist and more meditative mode in Machiavelli's writings that allows one to make a more convincing case for a Socratic Machiavelli.

Students of political philosophy can share with Machiavelli the pleasure that comes from visiting the courts of the ancients. But the pleasure derived from such visits can be doubled if one is accompanied by an insider who can offer access to chambers beyond the public galleries and rooms. Catherine Zuckert is one such guide, whom one can commend to any and all visitors to the courts of the ancients, the salons of the moderns, and the cafes of the postmoderns. It is during one such visit to Machiavelli's study that we find Zuckert making the remark that Machiavelli is "surprisingly like Socrates."[1] This remark will serve as the focal point for my discussion of *Machiavelli's Politics*. I begin by presenting and then buttressing Zuckert's case for the parallel. I then respond to some key reservations against terming Machiavelli a philosopher and asserting a parallel between Machiavelli and Socrates, focusing on the nature of Machiavelli's intellectual activity. While I do not dispute Zuckert's charge against Machiavelli that his activity, unlike Socrates's, is instrumental, my claim is that a less activist, more meditative mode is also found in Machiavelli's writings. This mode, I argue, allows one to term him a Socratic.

What Is a Socratic Philosopher?

Before one can make any claims about whether Machiavelli is a Socratic philosopher, one must in good philosophic fashion (Socratic fashion?) define what it means to be a Socratic philosopher. Both terms here are problematic. Does one

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[1]Catherine H. Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 361.

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go by the definition of philosophy current in the academic discipline of philosophy, or is one to be guided by the more or less agreed-upon canon (Zuckert's own preference)? The definitional problem is particularly acute when dealing with a figure such as Machiavelli, for the academic discipline of philosophy does not consider him a philosopher, and neither does he himself overtly engage thinkers of the canon who are considered philosophers. Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of considering Machiavelli a philosopher is one that philosophers ought to be suspicious of. One can make the case that Machiavelli is a philosopher because others who are considered philosophers by the academic discipline and who are firmly established in the canon as philosophers engaged his thought. Now this of course opens the possibility that simply because an author is name checked by a canonical philosopher, the former can be considered a philosopher. Machiavelli's case, however, is somewhat different, for it is not simply a case of *hapax legomenon*. Rousseau, for example, mentions Machiavelli several times in the *Social Contract*, approvingly quoting the latter's analysis of divisions in a republic and his analysis of Rome. Spinoza, too, engages with Machiavelli's thought, quoting him twice in the *Political Treatise*. This explicit engagement by two canonical authors is quite apart from Machiavelli's influence on political philosophy in general.

If the question concerning our use of the term "Socratic philosopher" with regard to Machiavelli revolves around the latter half of the term, in the case of Socrates, it is the opposite. By our standards, Socrates can fairly confidently be termed a philosopher. He is considered a philosopher by the academic discipline of philosophy, has a secure place in the canon, and has engaged the attention of other canonical philosophers. The definitional problem when it comes to Socrates is different. The trouble now arises from the first part of the term—*Socratic*. The problem is not just one of interpreting who is or is not a Socratic philosopher after one has settled the matter that the individual is a philosopher. The problem is that Socrates did not write and therefore what it means to be a *Socratic* is open to debate. We do of course have texts in which Socrates appears, most prominently in the writings of Aristophanes, Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle. But these accounts too are not unproblematic, for none of them can be taken simply as historical accounts of Socrates's activity. We must therefore make do with what Aristotle called *Sōkratikos logos*.[2] Aristotle pointedly discusses these in the *Poetics* not as treatises, but in his discussion of poetry. Drawing out the historical Socrates from the accounts we have is therefore difficult, if not impossible.[3] What one means by the term "Socratic philosopher" depends very much on the composite image of Socrates that one creates from the portraits found in the writings of the

[2]Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447a.

[3]Louis-André Dorion, "The Rise and Fall of the Socratic Problem," in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–23.

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Greek authors. This of course raises the danger that claims about what constitutes a Socratic philosopher proper, or which thinkers qualify as Socratic philosophers, will turn into a definitional exercise. To avoid this, we need first to build a notion of what it means to be a Socratic philosopher, and then show what, beyond categorization, is at stake in terming an author a Socratic philosopher. I turn to these tasks in turn.

Zuckert's Limited Case for Machiavelli as a Socratic

After completing her comprehensive book on the Platonic dialogues, Zuckert turned her attention to Machiavelli. It is in her book on the latter that she writes, "Machiavelli's complete silence with regard to Socrates (as opposed to his admittedly infrequent explicit references to Plato and Aristotle) appears to have a somewhat ambiguous meaning, because Machiavelli himself is in some respects surprisingly like Socrates."[4] The list of respects in which Machiavelli is like Socrates turns out to be surprisingly long.

One can begin with Socrates's interlocutors. The Platonic dialogues portray Socrates surrounded by the young. In fact, Socrates's reputation is besmirched in the eyes of the Athenian people because of his association with the young, who they argue have been corrupted by Socrates. In Alcibiades, they had the perfect example of Socrates's supposed pernicious influence. Socrates's association with the young is for us cemented through the two accounts of his trial. The charge of corrupting the youth features in both Plato's and Xenophon's accounts of Socrates's trial. In neither of the two accounts does Socrates deny that he consorts with the young. Furthermore, when offering his own defense of Socrates, Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* denies only the charge that Socrates corrupted the youth, in marked contrast to his divergence from Plato's account on whether Socrates examined the things "aloft and below."[5] The theme of Socrates's association with the young appears also in Aristophanes's *Clouds*, where Socrates's young pupils learn to strike their parents. While the young make a fitting audience for Socrates, his association with them is not one-sided—the young too are attracted to Socrates because they enjoy watching Socrates examine those in the agora. Plato's Socrates says the following: "it is because they enjoy hearing men examined, who supposed they are wise but are not. For it is not unpleasant."[6] Thus, edification is not all that Socrates offers the young.

Machiavelli's addressees for the two works in which he tells us everything he knows are also young. He addresses Lorenzo in the *Prince* since the original addressee dies. But many features of the *Prince* suggest that the text's true addressees are the young. Besides the criticism of hereditary principalities

[4]Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 361.
[5]Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.11.
[6]Plato, *Apology* 33c.

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and the all-but-direct questioning of the addressee's intellect in the chapter on advisors, the idea that the text's contents were not dictated by the immediate addressees is suggested by Machiavelli's call to arms against *fortuna* in the name of Italian unity. *Fortuna*, we are told elsewhere, favors the young.

Now if this reading takes some hermeneutical gymnastics that require us to look beyond the immediate dedicatee of the work, the case of the *Discourses* is far more obvious. The dedicatees of the latter work are young Florentines who ought to be princes but are not. Even so, one need not resort to identifying the dedicatees to discern Machiavelli's intended audience; the text reveals Machiavelli's intent very clearly. Reflecting on the varying assessments of ancient times and present times, Machiavelli makes the case that while erroneous judgments are often reached in favor of the past over the present, his own times are so patently worse than ancient times that his assessment of the present ought to be obvious to all. In writing of present times, he declares: "But since the thing is so manifest that everyone sees it, I will be spirited in saying manifestly that which I may understand of the former and of the latter times, so that the *spirits of the youth* who may read these writings of mine can flee the latter and prepare themselves to imitate the former at whatever time fortune may give them opportunity for it."[7] The spirit of the young is not just favored because they are better able to use force. Unlike the old, who are both more cognizant of the inconveniences of present times and are also less able to endure them, the young can not only use force to deal with the inconveniences, they also are better able to endure them. But the fact that they are less cognizant of the inconveniences means that even as they are better equipped to effect change, they may see less need of it. The perspective of the old, then, has an essential function. Both Socrates and Machiavelli perform this function.

While Socrates speaks to the young, seeking to guide them to a life of philosophy, and is surrounded by them as he goes about his activity in the agora, he serves as the link between the old and the young. Thus, we find that in the *Apology*, in addition to calling his way of life—namely, spending time "mak [ing] speeches about virtue"—the greatest good, he also wonders aloud whether there could be a greater good than consorting and conversing with and examining ancient men. All this Socrates says would bring "inconceivable happiness."[8] Machiavelli also addresses the young and wishes to move the young, but he too looks back and enjoys conversing with the ancients. His testimony to Vettori is known to all his readers, and it is backed by his statements in the *Prince* and the *Discourses*. In the *Prince*, he announces early on that the treatise is the fruit of his meditation on ancient things, and in the *Discourses* he writes that he wishes to bring the esteem bestowed on ancient plastic arts to ancient politics and military affairs. Thus, both Socrates and Machiavelli consort and

[7]Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), bk. II. Preface. Emphasis added.
[8]Plato, *Ap.* 40e–41c.

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converse on the one hand with the young and, on the other hand, with the old. More importantly, they seek out the young and the old in turn for similar reasons: they seek out the young for their spirit and the old for their wisdom and experience, the better to learn why they made the choices that they did. And it is this that allows us to assert that the parallel is not just coincidental, but informed by a shared understanding of the role of the two sides.

Since Socrates did not write and his philosophic activity involved spending time in the agora and elsewhere conversing, his interlocutors become an important part of his activity. A Socratic philosopher, one can thus legitimately claim, is one who aims to move the spirits of the youth, but still looks to the old. A Socratic philosopher may converse with other philosophers, but she is not concerned primarily with establishing her position in the philosophic conversation, but rather in moving the spirits of those around her. By this standard, then, Machiavelli is a Socratic.

Not just the way they undertook their respective projects, but also the way they related to those around them suggests a similarity between Machiavelli and Socrates. Socrates is unmoved by the fact that he holds heterodox opinions. Indeed, the truth of the Aristophanic portrayal of Socrates is precisely in the fact that Socrates is not ashamed of looking ridiculous. That this unconventionality comes not out of a lack of awareness of conventionality is evident in several of the Platonic dialogues. For the most obvious evidence, we can turn to the *Apology*, where Socrates asks himself in the name of the jury whether he is not ashamed of having acted in such a manner that he is now on trial for his life. Further, he makes clear that his choice not to concern himself with money, fame, and honor is so unconventional as not to seem human.[9] We find such self-aware unconventionality also in the *Gorgias* as Socrates converses with Polus and Callicles.[10] One does not have to go too far to find a similarly foregrounded unconventionality in Machiavelli.

Let us turn again to the dedications of his two main works. The *Prince* opens with the word "customary," only to go on to describe how the gift Machiavelli is offering is in fact unconventional. Similarly, the dedication to the *Discourses* sets this work apart from others. Machiavelli announces that he has "gone outside the common usage of those who write" by dedicating the work to those who deserve to be princes rather than those who are princes and could bestow favors on him. But Machiavelli does not stop at unconventionality; he does not shy from making himself ridiculous. Consider, for example, his self-portrait in the prologue to *La Mandragola*, where he announces that he merely asks for smirks and criticism as reward for his virtue. As with Socrates, Machiavelli's stance toward convention informs his activity.

[9]Plato, *Ap.* 31c.
[10]Plato, *Gorgias* 473e–474a.

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While the above offers a series of parallels that suggest an attitudinal similarity between the two men, for the parallel to be philosophically interesting, we must move to the substance of their respective thought. For while the characteristics of interlocutors and attitudinal stances are an important part of Socratic philosophy, to assert that Machiavelli is Socratic, we need to show what precisely about one's activity qualifies one as a Socratic. We can begin here with their starting point. Socrates, we are famously told, called philosophy down from heaven. Yet the portraits we get from the various accounts of Socrates are at odds. In the most famous account of Socrates's activity, he is charged with "examin[ing] the things aloft and below." Socrates denies this charge, offering the rather weak defense that the men of the jury have not heard him conversing about these things. But Plato's Socrates is also careful not to denounce such knowledge—he does not wish "to dishonor such knowledge."[11] We also have an account of Socrates's presence at a discussion of the things aloft and below in the *Timaeus* where Socrates terms this knowledge the highest peak (*akron*) of philosophy.[12] The matter is not, however, easily settled. Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* categorically denies not only the charge that Socrates examined the things aloft and below, but also that he held such matters in high esteem. He writes that in Socrates's view those who occupied themselves with an examination of such things were foolish (*mōros*).[13] To this we can juxtapose the account offered by Aristophanes in the *Clouds*, in which Socrates literally enters the stage aloft. Given all this it is not immediately evident what conclusion one can reach about the relation of Socrates's activity to the examination of things aloft and below. However, we do find one commonality in the three accounts mentioned. Socrates is presented in all three as most decidedly concerned with asking the "what is x?" question about human things. Even the caricatured Socrates of Aristophanes's *Clouds* is portrayed as dealing with human things, as the young Pheidippides emerges from the "thinkery" with views—albeit ridiculous—about the rights of children over their parents.

While this may seem a far cry from Machiavelli's writings, juxtaposing it with one of the most Machiavellian of Machiavelli's chapters in the *Prince*—chapter 15—one finds that Machiavelli's concerns are actually not dissimilar. Machiavelli in fact sets out to answer precisely the type of questions that concerned Socrates. And it is in response to these questions that he offers "the effectual truth of things." Machiavelli's moral revolution comes in the response he gives to the "what is x?" question, asked about the type of things that would not be foreign to Socrates. In the chapters that follow, Machiavelli asks: What is cruelty? What is mercy? What is liberality? What is spiritedness? What is faithfulness? If the question and concerns are similar, the way the two men went about answering the question is also similar.

[11]Plato, *Ap.* 19c.
[12]Plato, *Timaeus* 20a.
[13]*Mem.* 1.1.11.

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Socrates does not ask these questions or conduct his search in a vacuum. He begins by examining those around him and then taking a measure of the common opinion on the matter. He then goes about showing the inadequacy of these opinions, often by demonstrating that they lead to contradictions. Socrates's activity thus aims to move from *doxa* to truth. Setting aside for now Socrates's claim about the type of wisdom he possesses, we can at least assert something about the procedure by which he attempts or aims to move towards the truth. The procedure must begin by first engaging and debunking commonly held opinions.

Now if we turn to Machiavelli we find that his effort to move towards the truth about human things also begins with an examination and debunking of commonly held opinions. Thus, for example, what is commonly thought of as liberality turns out to be its opposite when practiced by the prince who uses resources that are taken from his people. Similarly, what appears merciful to the common understanding turns out to be cruelty when followed uncompromisingly by the prince. Thus even as Machiavelli effects his moral revolution and reaches conclusions diametrically opposed to those reached by Socrates, he begins like Socrates by engaging current opinions and showing how they are incoherent and lead to consequences that create a divergence between the appearance of virtue and the reality of the virtue as it reveals itself in the consequences of acting on the virtue.

Here emerges another feature central to Socratic philosophy. Socratic philosophy does not principally begin with transcendental or apodictic claims that are then used to adjudicate statements. Instead it begins with the here and now and works towards the truth. Furthermore, Socratic philosophy is concerned primarily with asking the "what is x?" question about human things. Machiavelli thus again fits the bill.

Moving beyond methodology, we see that Socrates's and Machiavelli's examination of moral claims leads them to conclusions about the nature of those claims that are also surprisingly compatible. The moral revolution inaugurated by the *Prince* aims to arm the prince with an understanding of virtue such that he can "learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity" (chap. 15). Virtue thus redefined as virtù turns out not to be a matter of habituation, or predisposition, but rather a question of knowledge. Possessing virtù and the correct understanding of the claims regarding virtue is a matter of learning (*imparare*), a matter of knowledge. Indeed, Machiavelli's ability to offer this advice is not the result of having been gifted with a particular character, or of following a particular formula, but the result of his own learning.[14] The equation of virtue and knowledge is thus formulated in Machiavelli's work.

[14] "Quanto io so e quanto io ho imparato" (*Discourses*, Dedication). And again in the *Prince* he writes: "imparata con una lunga esperienzia delle cose modern et una continua lezione delle antique" (*Prince*, Dedication).

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Turning to Plato's Socrates, we also find an equation that connects virtue and knowledge. While there is disagreement among commentators regarding both the nature and coherence of Socrates's position on virtue as knowledge, we can distill two main positions from the Platonic dialogues. Socrates first makes the claim that knowledge is a necessary condition for virtue.[15] Without knowledge of the good, the individual cannot do the good, or at least do the good knowingly. Socrates then introduces the further claim that all beings strive for the good. This latter claim, combined with the position that virtue or the good must be learned, that is, is a form of knowledge, leads Socrates to the stronger claim that knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for virtue.[16] Since individuals wish to do what they think is good, it follows that when they do the bad, they do so because they do not know what the good is. For our purposes, we need not adjudicate between these two claims, or enter the debate regarding the plausibility of the position that knowing the good suffices to induce individuals to act on the good. Even if we take Socrates's weaker claim that knowledge is a necessary condition for virtue, we find that Machiavelli, even as he redefines virtue, makes the Socratic move of connecting virtue and knowledge.

The above does not, of course, establish that Machiavelli was a Socratic, but it does suggest that Zuckert's claim about the remarkable similarity between the two is plausible. Before we can assert the parallel with greater certainty, however, we need to deal with two objections. The first is raised by those commentators who do not see Machiavelli as a philosopher or insist that he is not a philosopher. The second set of objections, however, is raised by Zuckert herself in her more detailed examination of the connection between the two figures in "Machiavelli: A Socratic?"[17] The interrogative in the title gives an indication of her position. I take the objections in turn before building my case that Machiavelli is a Socratic on the foundation established above.

The first objection to drawing a parallel between Machiavelli and Socrates rests on two grounds. First, Machiavelli does not qualify as a philosopher since he does not offer a coherent account of his views on any matter. His writings, the objection goes, cannot pass muster as philosophy since they are incoherent often to the point of contradiction. Now to this, of course, we can respond that there is possibly no philosopher in the canon whose work has not led to such divergent interpretations as to make readers wonder about the coherence of the author. To use the Socratic analogy, just because there is disagreement about the good does not mean that the good does not exist or cannot be known. Furthermore, we have testimony from Machiavelli suggesting that what he aimed to provide us was not simply a

[15]Plato, *Meno* 87e–89a.

[16]Plato, *Protagoras* 358b–c.

[17]Catherine H. Zuckert, "Machiavelli: A Socratic?," *Perspectives on Political Science* 47, no. 1 (2018): 27–37.

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chronicle of the history of Rome or of Florence, but rather texts that would allow the reader to better understand the nature of politics and political rule. He had, in other words, clearly articulated goals for his writings which require that he at least attempt to present a coherent account without contradictions.

But this is not the only worry about Machiavelli's status as a philosopher. The subject matter of Machiavelli's writings also puts his status as philosopher into question. Machiavelli is not obviously concerned with issues that occupy philosophers. We can consider the writings of two prominent scholars. Ernst Cassirer writes that "Machiavelli was no philosopher in the classical or Medieval sense of the term. He had no speculative system, not even a system of politics."[18] Similarly, Felix Gilbert writes, "Machiavelli was not a philosopher. He intended neither to outline a philosophical system nor to introduce new philosophical terms."[19] Yet both authors end up showing how Machiavelli in fact qualifies as a philosopher.

Cassirer's remark comes in the midst of his call to seek a broader perspective on Machiavelli. This broader perspective, it turns out, needs to be philosophic, for to truly understand Machiavelli, Cassirer argues, one needs to attend to Machiavelli's relationship to Scholastic philosophy. Machiavelli does not directly engage with the concerns of Scholastic philosophy—he damns through silence. The silence, therefore, is not a sign that Machiavelli's concerns are not philosophic. Indeed, that Machiavelli builds his political theory without justifying the state through recourse to the divine, as would be the case with the Scholastics, suggests that his task was indeed philosophic. For in Machiavelli's political theory, in Cassirer's own words, we find a reflection of the new cosmology that was gaining currency. So even as he declares it justified that Machiavelli is not considered a philosopher, Cassirer ends up showing why this consensus ought to be questioned.

Gilbert's remarks allow us to articulate even more clearly what, beyond Machiavelli's repudiation of the Scholastics, makes him a philosopher. After disqualifying Machiavelli from the ranks of philosophers on the grounds that he neither outlined a philosophical system nor introduced new concepts, Gilbert goes on to describe how Machiavelli redefined contemporary terms such as *fortuna*, *virtù*, and *necessità*. Now while this for Gilbert does not qualify as introducing new terms, we can turn to Machiavelli himself to understand what he saw himself as doing in redefining these terms. Machiavelli is famously concerned most with new princes, those new princes who rise by their own virtue. These new princes, Machiavelli tells us, ought to concern themselves with putting in place new orders that will

[18]Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946), 135.

[19]Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (New York: Norton, 1984), 193.

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endure beyond their death. But a central difficulty of accomplishing this task is that such princes must contend with the laws and orders already in place that the people are accustomed to. Machiavelli's advice to the prince is to introduce the new in the guise of the old. This makes the new more palatable and more likely to stick. It does not seem unfair to attribute this method to the very author who recommends it. In redefining *fortuna*, *virtù*, and *necessità*, Machiavelli is in fact offering us something new. That he does so in the guise of redefining terms and silently passing over the basic assumptions of the philosophy that came before him ought not to distract us from the positive aspects of his project. This project involves a new understanding of human beings in the world, and this does not, arguably, come without a new understanding of the world as a whole.

Zuckert places Machiavelli in the line of philosophers precisely on the grounds that he offers such a new understanding of the whole. Now here again a parallel arises with Socrates. There emerges for both Socrates and Machiavelli a connection between their examination of human things and the whole. In Zuckert's telling, Machiavelli's examination of human things certainly entails a view of the whole, but unlike that of Socrates, his examination is merely instrumental. To the extent that Machiavelli is indeed engaged in philosophy, his engagement is aimed at producing action—action that goes beyond the activity of philosophy. This "activist" stance leads to another fundamental difference between Socrates and Machiavelli. Since the activity of philosophy takes on an instrumental role in Machiavelli's thought, the life of philosophy is no longer the best way of life, it is merely an instrument. The divergence between the two is not just in method, but also in their conclusions. Zuckert rightly argues that ultimately the fundamental divide between Machiavelli and the ancients is about "the truth about the nature of all things, including human things."[20] These critical differences mean that for Zuckert, Machiavelli may be a philosopher, but he is most decidedly not a Socratic.

As mentioned above, the position one takes on Machiavelli's relationship to Socratic philosophy of course turns on one's conception of Socratic philosophy. Based on the minimal definition of Socratic philosophy articulated above, I wish to propose that while the answers that Machiavelli offers differ fundamentally from Socrates's, he is a Socratic on the grounds that there is a fundamental agreement on the questions that need to be asked and the nature of their respective activities. In Plato's account, Socrates defends his activity on three grounds. He first declares that by philosophizing he is doing the bidding of the gods. He offers an interpretation of the declaration of the oracle at Delphi that Socrates is the wisest, which requires that he ascertain what precisely the oracle meant by the declaration. Socratic philosophy is thus presented as the fulfillment of a pious duty. Second, Socrates presents his activity as a benefaction to the city. By calling on fellow Athenians to

[20]Zuckert, "Machiavelli: A Socratic?," 28.

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care for their souls over worldly possessions and reputation, he is working to better his fellow countrymen. But this is not all that makes Socrates's activity a worthy pursuit. He states that philosophizing and revealing the inadequacy of the views of others is not "unpleasant." We are not restricted to Plato alone in assessing the value of philosophy to Socrates's life. Xenophon, too, categorically terms Socrates a happy man.[21] If Socratic philosophy deals with human things in order to gain an understanding of the whole and this examination of human things brings happiness, then philosophy has a value in itself, beyond what it can allow one to do. Now this view seems to be quite distant from Machiavelli's view of his activity. Hence, Zuckert's cautious conclusion about the connection between Socrates and Machiavelli.

That Machiavelli's writings aim to awaken in his readers the desire to act is not in dispute. Even if the Medici are not the addressees of the *Prince*, the text serves to instruct all those who read it how to act. Even the ironic reading of the *Prince* is not exempt from such a view of the text, for in warning the people, Machiavelli is ultimately telling the people how they ought not to act. Beyond this, we have Machiavelli bemoaning the fact that he has been left out of government and therefore unable to act in the political sphere. All this to him is part of the malignity of fortune. Yet we also find in Machiavelli a different mood. And indeed, the very author who terms his philosophy "activist" opens the door to this reading.

In the letter to Vettori, Machiavelli describes the only pleasure he has during the day when he enters the courts of the ancients. His questioning of the ancient authors who do not begrudge him answers is not merely instrumental. There is for Machiavelli by his own telling a certain pleasure in contemplating the actions of the men who came before and learning about what motivated them; it is, he in fact tells us, his only pleasure at the time. The value of this testimony is arguably limited, however, since at least some of it is aimed at making a mockery of Vettori's day. But the more meditative Machiavelli is also found in the texts proper.

Machiavelli opens the *Discourses* by remarking on how dangerous it is to be the discoverer of new orders. This danger arises, he argues, from the "envious nature of men."[22] He then goes on to argue that founders of religions and politics are the most praised among men. Lesser praise also falls on "literary men." This pleasure, Machiavelli hopes, will motivate the young to follow his advice and become founders. The praise heaped on founders is the reward, the pleasure that the founder gets. This account has inspired some of Machiavelli's readers to argue that he conceives of himself as a founder.[23] If this is the case, then Machiavelli, just like the young, is hoping

[21]*Mem.* 4.8.11.

[22]*Discourses*, Preface.

[23]Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 83.

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to gain the pleasure that comes from recognition. The fact that his writings were not immediately acted upon does not detract from the point, since he makes evident in another text that he is not writing just for the here and now. In the *Florentine Histories*, he remarks that he will open with a more comprehensive history to ensure that his text is better understood in all times. Thus, Machiavelli's activist stance notwithstanding, his self-conception, even if he views himself merely as a literary man, suggests that the activity itself has some value. If Machiavelli is taken to be a founder, then his activity is not merely instrumental. Glory and the resultant pleasure is on offer to founders. Like the young who revel in the dangers of founding and at the same time seek glory, Machiavelli too is involved in a type of founding that the malignity of fortune allows him. Machiavelli the literary man, the founder of new modes and orders, struck by and recognizing the malignity of fortune, does gain pleasure from his pursuit.

But Machiavelli's instrumentalism perhaps runs deeper. Critics have charged that by allowing the means-ends calculus to creep into politics, Machiavelli opens the door to everything being turned into a means. Now here too Machiavelli's writing presents a different side. The ruthlessness for which his name has become a byword does most decidedly have an end. This end has correlates on two sides: the ruthlessness and need for violence must be aimed at the common good, and they must earn the actor glory. And it is precisely with this metric in mind that Machiavelli adjudicates the question of the best way of life. Far from ignoring this question, he addresses the issue directly in the *Life of Castruccio*. The answer does not suggest that Machiavelli has lowered his sights to mere security. The political life continues to hold dignity, for it is only through this that one gains glory. The answer is also not aimed at ignoring the question of the best way of life, but at casting doubt upon the choice of the worthy disciple of philosophy who, "like one who in the storm of dust and sleet which the driving wind hurries along, retires under the shelter of a wall; and seeing the rest of mankind full of wickedness, he is content, if only he can live his own life and be pure from evil or unrighteousness and depart in peace and goodwill with bright hopes."[24] For Machiavelli, this is to hope for too much. Abandoning politics even to those who are worldly, for example "men brought up in trade," is to court disaster for both the individual and the whole.[25] For this brings security and greatness to neither. If Zuckert is right that what Machiavelli is after is an understanding of the whole through the study of human things, then Machiavelli's response is born, not of immorality, or a crusade against Christianity, but of the recognition of humans' place in the whole. This place for Machiavelli is far too precarious to offer any protection behind or outside walls, even the walls of a cave. Socratic philosophy is after all most decidedly worldly.

[24]Plato, *Republic* 496d.
[25]Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, I.xxx.

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