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Farewell to Fortune

Anthony Parel

Abstract: Machiavelli's argument in chapter 25 of *The Prince* for resisting Fortune is no longer persuasive. The reason is that it is based on the outmoded Ptolemaic cosmology. With that cosmology long discarded, it is time to discard the *political philosophy* based on it. But discarding the political philosophy does not mean discarding the chapter. On the contrary, we should study the chapter with renewed diligence as part of the history of Machiavelli's political philosophy. The distinction between his political philosophy and the history of his political philosophy is critical here.

The five hundredth anniversary of *The Prince* is certainly an occasion to celebrate the enduring greatness of Machiavelli as a writer and a political thinker. Perhaps it is also an occasion to wonder whether everything that he wrote enjoys permanent validity. One is reminded here of Benedetto Croce's famous essay *What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel*.[1] Implicit in Croce's title is the idea that what is created in time is subject to the vagaries of time. It is therefore time to ask what is living and what is dead in Machiavelli's political philosophy.

In approaching this question, I limit myself to chapter 25 of *The Prince* (hereafter chap. 25), drawing from his other writings only to the extent needed. I argue that the case that Machiavelli makes for resisting the governance of the things of this world (*le cose del mondo*) by Fortune is no longer viable. The reason is that it was based on the now outmoded Ptolemaic cosmology. With that cosmology long discarded, the time has come to discard Machiavelli's case for Fortune's governance also.

The history of the cosmology and the related natural sciences dominant in the time of the Italian Renaissance provides the background for this

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[1]Benedetto Croce, *What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (London: Macmillan, 1915).

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discussion. Claudius Ptolemy (AD 90–168) and his followers are the key figures here. Ptolemy had divided cosmology into astronomy and astrology, both based on mathematical calculations of the positions and the motions of the seven planets—the sun, the moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, and Venus. Astronomy was the theoretical study of planetary motions, its basic text being Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Astrology was the applied branch of astronomy, being the study of the supposed effects of the positions and the motions of the seven planets on things on planet earth—on *le cose del mondo* of chap. 25. The basic text of astrology was Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* ("Mathematical treatise in four books"). *The Centiloquium*, a collection of "Hundred aphorisms" attributed to Ptolemy, was also well known in Machiavelli's Florence. "From his own day well into the Renaissance Claudius Ptolemy's name was well-nigh pre-eminent in astronomy, geography and astrology alike," writes F. E. Robbins, the translator and editor of *Tetrabiblos*. It "enjoyed almost the authority of a Bible among astrological writers."[2]

Universities of the day had their chairs of astrology, and every court, including the papal court, had its resident astrologers. In 1503 we see Machiavelli reporting from Rome that Pope Julius II's coronation was postponed for a week following the advice of his astrologer.[3] In 1504 Machiavelli wrote to Bartolomeo Vespucci, professor of astrology at the University of Padua, seeking advice on how to safeguard free will in a universe governed by the laws of astral motion.[4] In a 1514 letter to Francesco Vettori, Machiavelli mentions casually that he was versed in many things, among them astrology: "cose greche, latine, hebraiche, caldee"—"things Greek, Latin, Hebrew [and] Chaldaic."[5] ("Things Chaldaic" was but another name for astrology.)

In the last two decades of the fifteenth century, astrology had become a topic of much learned debate in Florence. There were those who defended it on scientific grounds, and those who attacked it on moral and philosophic grounds, seeing a potential threat to free will. For example, Marsilio Ficino's *De vita triplici* (1489) defended astrology on scientific grounds, pointing out the relationship that astrology had to medicine, the quality of the times, and the human temperament. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's magnum opus, *Disputationes in astrologiam*, in 12 books (1496), attacked it on moral and philosophic grounds, while Savonarola's *Contra astrologiam divinatricem* (1497) attacked it on moral and religious grounds,

[2]Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, ed. F. E. Robbins (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1980), xii.

[3]Niccolò Machiavelli, *Legazioni e commissarie*, vol. 2, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964), 649n4 (hereafter Bertelli).

[4]The text of Machiavelli's letter does not exist, but the text of Vespucci's reply is available. See Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 1063–64 (hereafter Martelli).

[5]Martelli, 1164.

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citing several astrological writers of the past and the present, among them Ptolemy himself—"the prince of these astrologers" (*il principe di questi astrologi*).[6] These debates were taking place, one needs hardly mention, before the very eyes of Machiavelli, who assumed charge of the second chancery in 1498.[7]

In today's Machiavelli scholarship there is a certain reluctance to acknowledge Machiavelli's acceptance of astrology as a science. Reading history backward, some Machiavelli scholars seem to think that astrology is a gross scientific error unworthy of so great a name. L. Arthur Burd, the great nineteenth-century editor of the Oxford edition of *Il principe*, did not seem to have had any such reluctance. Chap. 25, he explains, is "one of the most remarkable" in all of Machiavelli's writings. "In it, in order to settle a political question, he is forced to leave the domain of politics, and enter into a wider field"—that of astrology. "Whenever Machiavelli—and Guicciardini too[8]—were taken off the lines familiar to them, their natural acumen appears to desert them, and they share the superstition of the age. Contemporary speculations as to the nature and influence of 'fortune' were usually combined with the discussion of 'astrology,' which was regarded as a science which could help men to thwart or forward the decrees of fortune; and it is clear … that Machiavelli had mentally connected the two."[9]

There are five elements of astrological natural science present in chap. 25. They are (1) the very notion that Fortune governs the things of planet earth; (2) that this governance is divided into two parts, the universal and the particular; (3) that the times have quality; (4) that the harmony between one's actions and the quality of the times in which they are performed is the key to success; and (5) that free will (*libero arbitrio*) should be safeguarded, even though Fortune governs one half our actions.

[6]Savonarola, *Contra astrologiam divinatricem* (Venice, 1513), 10.

[7]For a brief account of these debates, see A. J. Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 11–25. Also Parel, "Ptolémée et le chapitre 25 du *Prince*," in *L'enjeu Machiavel*, ed. Gérald Sfez and Michel Senellart (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), 15–41; and "Human Motions and Celestial Motions in Machiavelli's Historiography," in *Niccolo Machiavelli: Politico, storico, letterato*, ed. Jean-Jacques Marchand (Rome: Salerno, 1996), 363–88.

[8]Roberto Ridolfi, Guicciardini's biographer, tells us how the learned historian carried with him for daily consultation "a quarto volume of hundreds of pages," drawn up by his astrologer, in which the whole of his life, past and future, was examined (Ridolfi, *The Life of Francesco Guicciardini*, trans. Cecil Grayson [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967], 58–59). Even though in his *Ricordi* he expressed skepticism about astrology, in his *Cose fiorentine* he noted in the margins: "Consult the astrologers for the moment of the origin and building of Florence" (ibid., 60).

[9]Machiavelli, *Il principe*, ed. L. Arthur Burd, with an introduction by Lord Acton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1891; repr. 1968), 355.

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Fortune Governs the Things of This World

To understand Machiavelli on this point we have to understand two things first: his meaning of the terms "Fortune" and "govern." His meaning of the term "Fortune," given its long and variegated history—philosophical, astrological, and religious—may come as a surprise. In *his* usage, the planets or the heavens (in the Ptolemaic sense) and Fortune (as the personification, in popular religious imagination, of the power of the planets or the heavens) both perform the same function. They govern things happening in the sublunar world. To this extent Fortune is functionally the same as the planets or the heavens.

Let us take a few examples. *Discourses* 2.29 is a good place to start. Apart from asserting that Fortune plays a governing role in human affairs, it also uses the terms "Fortune" and "heavens" interchangeably, thereby indicating that in his political thought Fortune is functionally the same as the heavens. The title of the chapter, taken from Livy, tells us what Fortune does: she "blinds the intellects of men when she does not wish them to oppose her plans." But in the body of the chapter that explains this "blinding" activity of Fortune, Machiavelli switches the terminology from "Fortune" to the "heavens." It is the heavens, we are now told, which blinded the judgment of the Roman army, and made it commit so many blunders. Thus in Machiavelli "Fortune," a term that was current in popular religious usage, and "the heavens," a term that was popular in contemporary scientific use, refer to the same function, namely, the governance of sublunar affairs by means of the power emanating from the motions of the planets. The grand conclusion of the chapter is that, whether you call the agent Fortune or the heavens, there is no escape from being subject to their governance. The best that humans can do is to assist Fortune and the heavens and not thwart them.[10]

Two of Machiavelli's poetic works, *Decennale* I and II, also use the terms "Fortune" and "the heavens" interchangeably. These poems are a narrative account of the political history of Florence and Italy for the period 1494–1504 and 1504–1509, respectively. Their general intellectual framework is supplied by astrological cosmology. The very first verse of *Decennale* I states that "the planets" during these years were hostile to Italy: "I shall sing Italian hardships for those two lustres now just over, under planets hostile to her good."[11] The astrological motif is carried right through the poem. Verse 106 remarks that Florence's foreign policy was following "the star" of France; and in verses 121, 124, and 127 the terms "heaven" and "Fortune" are used interchangeably. According to verse 142, both Venice and Milan were

[10]Machiavelli, *The Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1965), 1:406–7 (hereafter Gilbert).

[11]Gilbert, 3:1445.

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moved by territorial greed, as "heaven determined"; and according to verse 463, Alexander VI, father of Cesare Borgia, "was slain by heaven." The poem ends on a pessimistic note: Fortune still continues to be unfavorable to Italy: "By no means is Fortune yet satisfied; she has not put an end to Italian wars, nor is the cause of so many ills wiped out" (v. 523). Just as the poem began with a complaint against the planets, so it concludes with a complaint against Fortune. The planets and Fortune were performing the same function, that of governing Italian affairs in an adverse way.

Decennale II continues the analysis of Italian politics in the same way. On the one hand you have Fortune and the planets or the heavens acting against Italy, and on the other you have Italian rulers who do not respond to this with adequate virtù:

> So blinded are you by your present greed which over your eyes holds a thick veil that things remote you cannot see. From this it comes that heaven, shifting from this to that, shifts your states more often than the heat and the ice are changed, because if you turned your prudence to learning the ill and finding its remedy, such great power from heaven would be taken.[12]

Machiavelli's other well-known poem, *Fortune*, also follows the same linguistic pattern of using "heaven" and "Fortune" interchangeably. Verse 82 remarks that the wheels of Fortune "are ever turning, day and night, because heaven commands (and she is not to be resisted)." Again, verse 112 makes the claim that humans cannot change their character, nor give up the disposition that *heaven* endows them with; and that in the midst of their journey *Fortune* abandons them.[13]

What the three sources examined above indicate is that functionally there is no real difference between the impact of Fortune and that of the heavens or the planets on human affairs. The distinction between them is merely verbal.

So much for the meaning of "Fortune" in chap. 25. Turning now to the meaning Machiavelli gives to the term "govern," it refers to the exercise of the power of the physical motion that the planets have on sublunar things, a power that is thought to have a qualitative effect also. Governance by the planets came to mean the same as governance by Fortune. Governance here did not involve mental or moral activity of any kind. Neither the planets nor Fortune were moral or thinking entities. Fortune was said to have mind and will only in a metaphorical sense. Fortune was nothing but a creation of the imagination of pseudoreligion. Governance by the planets, on the other hand, was something that was physical, calculable, and predictable, at least according to the cosmology of the day. Though this governance was physical in nature, it was said to have the capacity to affect sublunar affairs either harmfully or beneficially—depending on the positions of the planets

[12]Gilbert, 3:1461.
[13]Gilbert, 2:747.

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concerned—a point elaborated at great length in book 1 of the *Tetrabiblos*. Briefly, "govern" in the context of chap. 25 has a cosmological meaning. But it gets compromised because of the existence of a parallel terminology that attributes to the governance a pseudoreligious meaning also. In other words, the cosmological and the pseudoreligious meanings get intertwined in the concept "govern."

We cannot enter here into a discussion of how Fortune came to be associated the heavens or the planets and acquired a pseudoreligious meaning. One would have to study the vast history of popular religion and astrology, going back at least to Roman antiquity. The Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance adapted this history to suit their needs. Dante's *Inferno* 7.67–96 is a good example of such adaptation. And Machiavelli adapted it in his own way, positing no functional differences between the governance by Fortune and that by the heavens. The functional identity of the two was so readily accepted in his day that he used it without fear of contradiction or intellectual embarrassment.

While belief in the governance of human affairs by Fortune was part of popular religious belief, belief in the governance of sublunar affairs by the heavens or the planets was part of current scientific thought. It must be pointed out, however, that Ptolemy, to his great credit, never associated popular religious belief about Fortune with what he regarded as the scientific canons of his cosmology.

The Universal/Particular Distinction

The next astrological element that we find in chap. 25 concerns the way Fortune governs countries and individuals. Machiavelli makes an important distinction here, that between Fortune in *universali* and Fortune in *particulari*. The source of this distinction is ultimately Ptolemaic astrology. According to Ptolemy predictions of how the planets govern were divided into "two great and principal parts"—the universal and the particular. The universal is "that which relates to whole races, countries and cities"; and the particular is "that which relates to individual men."[14] The cause "both of the universal and of the particular events is the motion of the planets."[15]

Tetrabiblos book 2 gives a detailed analysis of how the planets affect the affairs of countries or cities. Each country or city has its horoscope. It was important that the astrologer knew the time of their founding. The procedure was "to treat a city like a person": if the time of the founding of a city was not accurately known, it was enough if the astrologer knew the time of birth of the city's founder or others involved in the founding.[16] As we saw above,

[14]*Tetrabiblos* 2.117–19.
[15]Ibid., 3.221.
[16]Ibid., 2.161n1.

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Guicciardini was curious to consult the astrologer regarding the time of the founding of Florence.

That Machiavelli himself was associated with practices related to predictive political astrology is beyond doubt. Florence had its resident court astrologer. This astrologer, one Lattanzio Tedaldi, in 1509, during the Pisan war, advised Machiavelli as to the astrologically most propitious time to launch the attack. "Thursday being the day to take possession of Pisa, under no circumstances should Florentines enter the city before 12.30. A little after 13.00 would be the most propitious for us. If Thursday is not suitable, Friday will be the next best, again after 13.00 but not before 12.30, and the same applies to Saturday."[17] This amusing story (amusing to us) gives us some idea of the astrological beliefs and practices of the ruling elite of Florence. Florence, they believed, was under the jurisdiction of the planets.

But the best evidence of Machiavelli's use of the Ptolemaic universal/particular distinction is found in *The Prince* itself. Chap. 25 is divided into two principal parts. The first part deals with Fortune's governance over countries ("Fortune in *universali*"), and the second with Fortune's governance over individuals such as Julius II ("Fortune in *particulari*").

The first part of chap. 25 is concerned with Fortune's governance over France, Spain, Germany, and of course Italy. Machiavelli famously compares Fortune's role here to the behavior of a raging river. Fortune had been very hostile to Italy recently; and the rulers of Florence did not know how to deal with that hostility. "If you consider Italy," he writes, "she is a plain without dykes and without any embankment; but if she were embanked with adequate … [virtù], like Germany, Spain, and France, this flood either would not make the great variations it does or would not come upon us. I think this is all I need to say in general [*universali*] on resisting Fortune."[18]

The second part of chap. 25 takes up Fortune's governance over individual human beings, in this case Julius II. Restricting himself more to particulars (*Fortune in particulari*), Machiavelli wonders why some princes fail and others succeed. This is because those who succeed have their temperament and actions harmonized with the quality of the times, while those who fail have these things in disharmony. The underlying theory, as we shall see in the next section, is based on Ptolemaic astrology.

What I want to stress at this juncture of the argument, however, is that the universal/particular distinction is of critical importance for an accurate understanding of chap. 25. Fortune governs countries differently from the way she governs individuals. The metaphor of the raging river explains how she

[17]For Tedaldi's letter advising Machiavelli on the best time to attack Pisa, see his letter of 5 June 1509, in Martelli, 1107. Machiavelli actually entered Pisa on 8 June 1509—three days after Tedaldi had written his letter. See R. Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolo Machiavelli*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 108.

[18]Gilbert, 1:90.

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governs countries like Italy; and the woman metaphor explains how she governs particular individuals: she governs them by letting herself be won over by the impetuous.

The use of the universal/particular distinction is found in yet another of his writings—the famous *Ghiribizzi* ("musings"), a letter written in September 1506, to Giovan Battista Soderini. Its subject matter is the question of how to reconcile astral determinism, free will, and Fortune's governance over individuals such as Hannibal, Scipio, and of course Julius II.[19] In a very significant passage, Machiavelli invokes the general theory of the universal/particular distinction to make his point: "times and affairs change in general and individually" (*e tempi et le cose universalmente et particularmente si mutano spesso*). One can hardly think of a better piece of evidence to show how deeply the universal/particular distinction had penetrated Machiavelli's political mind.

His poem, *Fortune*, also uses the universal/particular distinction. The first part of this poem (verses 130–59) is concerned with how Fortune governs countries and empires. The list is long and comprehensive—Egypt, Assyria, the Medes, Persia, Greece, Memphis, Thebes, Babylon, Troy, Carthage, Jerusalem, Athens, Sparta, and Rome. They were all subject to Fortune in *universali*.[20]

The second part (verses 160–93) is concerned with Fortune in *particulari*. The individuals listed include Alexander, Caesar, Pompey, Tullius, and Marius.[21]

The three sources cited above show that Machiavelli used the universal/particular distinction with consistency and clarity. Yet critics run into difficulty as they try to make sense of the distinction. This is partly because no attention is being paid to the intellectual history of the universal/particular distinction. That history, as we have indicated above, goes back to the broader history of Ptolemaic astrology.

Mikael Hörnqvist's handling, or mishandling, of the universal/particular distinction in his otherwise excellent book *Machiavelli and Empire* is a case in point. He seems to equate Fortune in *universali* with "abstract universals and cosmological speculation" and Fortune in *particulari* with "the political *here and now*." There is, he says, a "descent" from the exalted heights of Renaissance cosmology toward "the political *here and now*." To make his point, this is repeated several times. Thus according to him, in chap. 25 there is a descent from "the level of abstract principles to the concrete political *here and now*." Machiavelli is applying, he says, "the general principle of the chapter to the immediate particular context of the *here and now*." Again, his "general teaching undergoes a gradual adaptation to the *here and now*." Finally, it is asserted that in chap. 25 there is a "definite shift of focus from

[19]For the text of the *Ghiribizzi*, see Gilbert, 2:895–97; Martelli, 1082–83.
[20]Gilbert, 2:748.
[21]Ibid., 748–49.

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a discourse on principles and generalities to the one directed at the *here and now*."[22]

However, a grasp of the history of the universal/particular distinction would enable the reader to see that "the universal" in chap. 25 is not about general principles or general teaching but about how Fortune governs countries; and that "the particular" is not about the here and now—whatever that means—but about how Fortune governs individuals. There is no descent from the abstract to the concrete, either. The universal and the particular refer to the two modes of governance by Fortune.

The Quality of the Times

That the times have quality is quintessentially an astrological idea, and it figures very prominently in the second part of chap. 25. The term "quality" here refers to the maleficent or beneficent effects that the motions of the planets are supposed to have on sublunar affairs. The theory is that the physical motions of the planets, which are mathematically calculable, have *qualitative*, that is, either beneficent or malevolent effects on human affairs. Ptolemy divided the planets into two categories: Jupiter, Venus, and the moon were thought to be beneficent, while Saturn and Mars were thought to be maleficent. The sun and Mercury could be one or the other depending on with which planets they were aligned at a given time.[23]

According to Ptolemy, the planets were also "the lords of the times" (*chronocrators*).[24] The times, over which they had lordship, affected human activities either beneficially or malignantly. Every segment of time—year, month, day, hour, minute, moment—was thought to be endowed with its appropriate quality and causal potency. The science of astrology codified the results of the planets' lordship over the times by placing each division of time under the protection of a planet in its system of "chronocratories."[25]

Machiavelli was quite familiar with these aspects of astrology, too. We have already seen above how the attack on Pisa was timed according to the advice of the court astrologer. References to the theory of the quality of the times are found even in some of his diplomatic dispatches. King Federico of Aragon, he reports to his superiors in Florence, conducted his affairs "on a day-to-day basis, evaluating things hour by hour, being careful not to make mistakes; this was because he believed that the times were superior to our brains."[26]

[22]Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 236, 239, 248, 252, 254. Italics in original.

[23]*Tetrabiblos* 1.39.

[24]Ibid., 4.451–53.

[25]Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans* (New York: Dover, 1960), 61.

[26]Bertelli, 2:912.

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Similarly, in a dispatch from the court of Cesare Borgia, he reports that the duke believed that in the year 1502, the planets were hostile to the subjects who rebelled against their rulers.[27] Even in *Mandragola* (act 2, scene 6) the theory makes a brief appearance: Lucrezia took her medicine at an astrologically appropriate time: "This evening after supper, because the Moon is right and the time can't be more suitable."

But nothing illustrates better the depth of Machiavelli's commitment to the theory of the quality of the times than his own use of it in his analysis of Julius II, in part 2 of chap. 25. In the space of less than two pages, he refers to the theory nine times. Julius succeeded in everything that he did because there was harmony between his actions and the quality of the times in which he acted. If there was disharmony between them, he would have failed. Machiavelli is quite firm on this.

Discourses 3.9 confirms the point: Scipio Africanus, Fabius Maximus Cunctator, Hannibal, Julius II, and Soderini, were all subject to the rule of harmony. The point is made in the *Ghiribizzi* too: "he is fortunate who harmonizes his procedure with his time, but on the contrary, he is not fortunate who in his actions is out of harmony with his time and with the type of its affairs."[28]

Astrological Anthropology

An accurate understanding of Machiavelli's analysis of Julius II in chap. 25 requires a basic grasp of the astrological anthropology underlying that analysis. A key element of that anthropology was the theory of the four humors, according to which the bodily substratum of the human personality was composed of the four humors—blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile or choler. The humors in turn give you your temperament or particular nature (*natura*), whether sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, or choleric. The motions and the positions of the planets had a qualitative influence on your temperament. It was therefore very important for the astrologer to know what your temperament was and under which planet you were born. Only then would he be able to give you the best advice. For the motions and the positions of the planet under which you were born determined whether the required harmony between your actions and the times would be possible. If you were born with a choleric temperament, for example, you will always remain a choleric person and behave like one. No alternation in the pattern of your behavior would be possible. Machiavelli was very emphatic on this: "we cannot counteract that to which nature inclines us."[29]

[27]Bertelli, 1:353.
[28]Gilbert, 2:897.
[29]*Discourses* 3.9; Gilbert, 1:453.

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As every reader of chap. 25 knows, it is on the basis of this anthropology that Machiavelli makes his famous analysis of Julius II. The first thing required to understand this analysis correctly is to know exactly what Julius II's temperament was. Machiavelli used two different terms, one technical, the other colloquial, to identify it. The technical term was "choleric" and the colloquial term was "impetuous." Writing from Rome on 20 November 1503, he used the technical term to describe Julius's nature or temperament: he was "honorable and choleric in his nature" (*nella natura sua onorevole e collerica*).[30] *Decennale* I confirms this: he was "choleric in his humor" (*umor collera maligna*).[31] However, in chap. 25 he writes that Julius II was "impetuous" by nature. A correct reading of Machiavelli here should be historical, that is, sensitive to his use of both the technical and the colloquial vocabulary prevalent in his time. A nonhistorical reading of the meaning of the term "impetuous" can lead to a nonhistorical interpretation of chap. 25.[32]

The key to Julius's success, as mentioned, was the harmony between his choleric temperament and the quality of the times in which he had to act. Had the quality of the times changed, and action required a person with a different—say, the sanguine—temperament, Julius would have failed: "for never would he have turned away from those methods to which his nature inclined him."[33] *Discourses* 3.9 confirms this: "Because a man accustomed to acting in one way never changes. … So of necessity when the times as they change get out of harmony with that way of his, he falls."[34]

The question of the fixity of one's temperament and the influences of the planets on one's behavior brings us to the issue of how Machiavelli defends free will in chap. 25.

Free Will and Fortune

The stated purpose of chap. 25 is to show how far Fortune can be resisted. The *conditio sine qua non* of this resistance is the exercise of free will: "in order not to annul our freewill, I judge it true that Fortune may be mistress of one half our actions but that even she leaves the other half, or almost, under our control."[35] What is remarkable about this resistance is that, as the above passage indicates, free will has to do its work in a universe that is half governed by Fortune.

[30]Bertelli, 2:655.
[31]Martelli, 948.
[32]For an example of a nonhistorical interpretation of the term "impetuous," see Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, 234–54.
[33]Gilbert, 1:92.
[34]Ibid., 1:453.
[35]Ibid., 1:90.

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There are two ways of resisting Fortune and exercising free will in such a universe. The first, with its raging-river metaphor, concerns rulers in charge of the safety of their countries, and the second, with its woman metaphor, concerns individuals as individuals. These metaphors, together with the universal/particular distinction, hold the key to an accurate understanding of Machiavelli here. For the mode of exercising free will varies, depending on whether governance of countries or the conduct of particular individuals is involved.

It is relatively easy to exercise free will where the governance of countries is concerned. Rulers have ample time to anticipate the threats to their countries, implement sound military policies, and show adequate virtù. Foresight and preventive measures (the dams and dykes in the metaphor) can lessen the damages of the floods. The formulation and execution of an effective foreign policy would indicate that free will is being exercised and Fortune resisted.

But the exercise of free will becomes complicated where individual human agents are concerned. Here the individual has to take into account not only free will but also his or her temperament and the quality of the times. Free will, in other words, does not operate in an anthropological vacuum. As his case study of Julius II amply shows, Machiavelli adhered strictly to the canons of the prevailing astrological anthropology. This anthropology never questioned whether humans had free will: it took for granted that they had. What it questioned, however, was whether the exercise of free will should always lead to success in the actions freely taken. The answer was no. This was because success depended not only on free will, but also on the harmony between the quality of the times and the temperament of the agent.

So it came down to this: which temperament was best suited to achieve success in politics? There was no question that Machiavelli preferred the choleric temperament. Of the four temperaments—sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, and choleric—the last one, he believed, was best suited for success in politics. It was to make this point that he invented the famous metaphor of Fortune as a woman.

The question may be phrased as follows: how would you deal with Fortune (and planetary influences), supposing she is a woman? You would deal with her (and them) as a choleric person would—with audacity and ferocity: it is "better to be impetuous than to be cautious, because Fortune is a woman," and she lets herself be won more by the impetuous than by those who proceed coldly.[36] Briefly, in order to resist Fortune and exercise free will successfully, you need, in addition to everything else, the right temperament.

Machiavelli's use of the woman metaphor has caught the attention of his critics ever since. According to Federico Chabod, one of the most respected

[36]Ibid., 1:92.

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of these critics, the introduction of the woman metaphor has had the effect of changing the tenor of the argument in chap. 25—"from reasoning to imagery, from the concept to the effigy, from the systematic argument to the rapidly-drawn picture." The central issue of how the individual exercises free will, given the astrological anthropology, gets sidetracked. The introduction of the woman metaphor, says Chabod, is more like a "digression" and an "interpolation" than a step in the direction of advancing the argument. Indeed it softens, as it were, "the doctrinal severity" of the argument (based on astrological anthropology).[37]

To sum up: Machiavelli's defense of free will is presented solidly within the framework of Ptolemaic cosmology and anthropology. There are two ways of exercising free will. The floods metaphor addresses problems faced by countries and the woman metaphor addresses those faced by individual human agents. The misreading of the meaning of the universal/particular distinction, combined with the refusal to recognize Machiavelli's indebtedness to astrological anthropology, and an eagerness to shift the focus of attention from astrological anthropology to contemporary feminism, has sometimes led critics to assert that the two metaphors have "conflicting implications for conduct."[38] This plainly is not the case as far as Machiavelli is concerned. The two modes of exercising free will are not in conflict with each other, for they address two compatible issues; and the two metaphors make this point very deftly.

Free Will, Machiavelli, and Lucretius

Recent interest in Lucretius and his *De rerum natura* has led some scholars to seek the explanation for Machiavelli's philosophy of free will in the Lucretian theory of the atomic swerve (*clinamen*). Alison Brown rightly points out that Machiavelli had picked up Lucretius's association of the swerve with free will.[39] Paul Rahe has gone to the extent of claiming that Machiavellian political thought has a foundation in Epicureanism.[40]

The background to these claims is the following. There exists in the Vatican Library a transcript of the entire text of *De rerum naura* in Machiavelli's hand,

[37]Federico Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, trans. David Moore (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 22–23.

[38]For an example, see Hanna Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolo Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 148–53.

[39]Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 74.

[40]Paul Rahe, "In the Shadow of Lucretius: The Epicurean Foundations of Machiavelli's Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 28 (2007): 30–55; and *Against Throne and Altar: Machiavelli and Political Theory under the English Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 32–45.

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made in 1497, a year before he was appointed to the second chancery.[41] What has received special scholarly attention is the marginal notes that he made in the transcript, especially the two notes on the lines referring to the atomic swerve. Lucretius opines that it is the motion involved in the atomic swerve that makes free will possible. Machiavelli comments on this as follows: "from motion there is variety, and from it we have free mind [*liberam habere mentem*]."[42] The other marginal note "concerns our ability to resist external pressure to act against our will … thanks to the freedom given to us by the swerve of the very first atoms."[43]

Brown is fully aware that Machiavelli had "accepted the important role played by astrology in our lives"; yet she goes on to say that he was "novel in allowing unexpected room" for the theory of the swerve.[44] She grants that the marginal notes by themselves "would amount to no more than fragmentary textual comments unless supported by other evidence." At the same time, she thinks that when interpreted in the light of what Machiavelli wrote in his mature years, the marginalia "emerge as the cornerstones of a coherent and original philosophy that integrates his political views with his scientific atomism and religious naturalism."[45]

The above conclusion is open to two questions, however. First, granted that Machiavelli knew the theory of the swerve well, does it follow that he also subscribed to it? And second, what theory did he actually use to explain free will in chap. 25? The answer to the first question is that he did not subscribe to the theory of the swerve. The evidence for this is found in the answer to the second question: in chap. 25, instead of using the theory of the swerve, he used the theory derived from Ptolemaic astrology—as we have seen in great detail in the preceding sections. He did not use the theory based on Lucretian atomism.

One wonders why Machiavelli rejected the theory of the swerve. Surely it was not due to any ignorance on his part. Indeed, as the marginalia indicate, the rejection occurred in spite of his knowledge of the theory. Perhaps in his mature years he had enough time to reflect on the usefulness of it for chap. 25. Perhaps it is even possible—and here I am speculating—that he doubted the very validity of the theory of the swerve. For one thing, he might have learned from the ongoing debates in Florence that the swerve was an invention of Epicurus, not found in Democritus. He might also have known that

[41]Monsignor Jose Ruysschaert, the vice-prefect of the Vatican Library, brought to the attention of Sergio Bertelli and Franco Gaeta, then (1950s) working on the Feltrinelli edition of Machiavelli, the existence of this transcript (MS Rossi 884). Bertelli published two articles on the transcript in the *Rivista storica italiana*, in 1961 and 1964.

[42]Brown, *Return of Lucretius*, 74.

[43]Ibid., 74–75.

[44]Ibid., 85.

[45]Ibid.

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Lucretius, following Epicurus, used it to explain how free will was possible in an otherwise atomically deterministic universe.

In this regard the observation of W. H. D. Rouse, the translator of the Loeb edition of *De rerum natura*, is worthy of attention. Rouse remarks (and he goes as far back as Cicero) that "the *clinamen* is no part of the theory of Democritus, but was added by Epicurus … in order to use it later in his explanation of human free will. This seeming small concession, while absolutely necessary, really gives the whole system away, because it implies that a universe based on material causes alone is inconceivable. The *clinamen* is an arbitrary force."[46] Henri Bergson also has something similar to say: "Epicurus would certainly not have invented *clinamen* if he had not felt the need for establishing the freedom of man."[47]

In any event, there is evidence, albeit of a negative kind, which suggests that Lucretius was not one of Machiavelli's favorite poets. In his famous letter of 10 December 1513 to Francesco Vettori that announced the completion of *The Prince*, he mentions several poets, and Lucretius is not one of them. "When I leave the wood, I go to a spring, and from there to an aviary of mine. I have a book under my arm, Dante or Petrarch, or one of the minor poets like Tibullus, Ovid and such."[48] If Lucretius was as important to Machiavelli as his supporters say that he was, how to explain this embarrassing omission?[49]

[46]Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1966), 100n.

[47]Henri Bergson, *The Philosophy of Poetry: The Genius of Lucretius*, ed. Wade Baskin (New York: Wisdom Library, 1959), 17. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: Norton, 2011), 188–89, gives an account of the meaning of the term "swerve," but does not tell anything about its arbitrary and invented character.

[48]Harvey Mansfield Jr.'s translation, in Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 109.

[49]It is also worth noting that recent secondary literature sees no link between Lucretius and Machiavelli. The relevant chapters of *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), make no mention of Machiavelli—he is not even in the index. Neither Jill Kraye nor Quentin Skinner, in their magisterial articles in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), notices any influence of Lucretius on Machiavelli. Miles J. Unger, Machiavelli's most recent biographer, makes no mention of Lucretius either (Unger, *Machiavelli: A Biography* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011]). It is of course possible that these scholars missed something very important about Machiavelli and Lucretius; but the present state of our knowledge of the intellectual context of Machiavelli's thought does not support the view that the theory of atomic swerve had any influence on his philosophy of free will.

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The Place of Fortune in *The Prince* Taken as a Whole

It becomes evident from the foregoing that chap. 25 presents the most systematic account of Fortune that we can find anywhere in Machiavelli's writings. Chapters 1 and 7 add their fair share. Chapter 1 is about how countries, whether principalities or republics, are acquired; they are acquired by either virtù or Fortune. The focus here is on countries. Chapter 7 by contrast is mainly about one individual—Cesare Borgia, and how his undue dependence on Fortune brought about his ultimate ruin. The difference between Machiavelli's analysis of Cesare Borgia in chapter 7 and of Julius II in chapter 25 is that the first is less systematic than the second. Substantively, they are both case studies in Fortune in *particulari*.

In sum, there is an overall consistency in Machiavelli's treatment of Fortune in *The Prince*. This he was able to maintain thanks to his use of various tools of Ptolemaic natural philosophy available to him. His main purpose in *The Prince*, however, was not to defend Fortune but to show how to resist her, and how virtù can and should be exercised and free will safeguarded. But he chose to pursue his purpose with the aid of Ptolemaic cosmology, not Lucretian atomism.

Paradoxically, it is this very dependence on Ptolemaic cosmology that ultimately undermines the validity of his theory of Fortune. Modern cosmology no longer believes that there is a hierarchical relationship between planet earth on the one hand and the seven planets on the other. The so-called superior planets do not govern things happening in the sublunar world. With that belief gone, the belief that Fortune governs is also gone. Fortune is now seen as nothing more than a figment of the poetic imagination of popular religion. Fortune governs nothing.

Likewise, thanks to modern cosmology, no one believes that the times have quality. The same is true of the theory that defines human agency in terms of humors and temperament. There is no basis in contemporary moral philosophy for the Machiavellian belief that the key to the successful exercise of free will is the harmony between the temperament of the human agent and the quality of the times in which he or she acts. In a word, the obsolescence of Ptolemaic cosmology spells the obsolescence of the political philosophy that we find in chap. 25. No wonder that no serious political philosopher after Machiavelli has paid any attention to Fortune. The term Fortune has simply vanished from modern political vocabulary. It is time to bid farewell to Fortune.

The current irrelevance of Machiavelli's philosophy of Fortune raises the broader issue of the appropriate relationship that a political philosopher should maintain with natural philosophy. Within what limits may a thinker set his or her political philosophy within the framework supplied by the natural philosophy of the day? Should, for example, Darwinism be used to create the framework of modern political philosophy?

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How much attention should political philosophy pay to the theory of natural selection? In Aristotle we have the example of a thinker from the past. He propounded a cosmological theory as well as ethical and political theories. Yet he did not allow his cosmology to set the framework of his ethical and political theories. Today we read his *Physics* only for its historical, not scientific, value. But we still read his *Politics* and *Ethics* for their enduring philosophical value. We are able to do this because of the safe distance that he was able to maintain between his cosmology on the one hand, and his politics and ethics on the other. Unfortunately, Machiavelli did not keep the distance safe enough, with the result that we have to ignore his philosophy of Fortune because of its too close dependence on Ptolemaic cosmology.

The way Machiavelli used his knowledge of Ptolemaic cosmology and related sciences is a testimony to his vast erudition and elegant writing style. Only a writer of his eminence could have captured the essence of Renaissance cosmology in so brief a compass, and succeeded, with the aid of the marvelous metaphors of the floods and the woman, to leave an indelible impression on the imagination of generations of readers following.

The obsolescence of Machiavelli's philosophy of Fortune does not mean the obsolescence of chap. 25. The latter still occupies an important place in *The Prince*. But it does so as part of the *history* of political philosophy, and not as part of his *political philosophy* as such. The resulting altered status of chap. 25 should come as a relief to those political theorists who in vain make valiant efforts to make Machiavelli's philosophy of Fortune look modern. Instead, the altered status of the chapter should prompt every student of Machiavelli to take a deeper interest in the history of Renaissance cosmology and related natural sciences, including Lucretian atomism. A beginning of this is already under way.[50] Such a broader historical interest can help us to locate Machiavelli in his own historical period. In mid-twentieth century, studies in Italian civic humanism initiated by scholars such as Hans Baron and Felix Gilbert deepened our knowledge of the civic humanist context of Machiavelli's political philosophy. A deeper knowledge of the history of natural science in the Italian Renaissance can help us locate Machiavelli in the history of the natural sciences of the period. And the study of the historical context of chap. 25 is a good place to start. The altered status of chap. 25 raises the question of how virtù may now be interpreted or reinterpreted. Traditionally, Machiavellian virtù was interpreted in terms of its opposition to Fortune. Now with Fortune out of the picture, virtù can be understood in strictly human terms—as autonomous, if morally

[50]See, for example, Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life*, trans. Carolyn Jackson and June Allen (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Anthony Grafton, *Cardano's Cosmos: The World and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Robert S. Westman, *The Copernican Revolution: Prognostication, Skepticism, and Celestial Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

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neutral, exercise of political power. It is no longer necessary to imagine Machiavellian virtù to be the outcome of a fight involving nonexistent cosmic forces symbolized by the figure of Fortune. The obsolescence of the philosophy of Fortune permits the emergence of a new understanding of the philosophy of Machiavellian virtù.

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