INTRODUCTION

It is necessary that we add to the knowledge of history that branch of philosophy which deals with morals and politics. . . . Nor in this connection do I hesitate to speak of the most distinguished of his class, and to set up as a model for imitation Machiavelli and his precious *Observations on Livy*. . . . I do not defend his impiety or his lack of integrity, if he actually had such faults. And yet . . . if I give a just estimate of his purpose in writing, and if I choose to reinforce his words by a sounder interpretation, I do not see why I cannot free from such charges the reputation of this man who has now passed away. . . . If our plan is to interpret authors favorably, we shall palliate many faults in this man also, or we shall at least tolerate in him those that we tolerate in Plato, Aristotle, and others who have committed offenses not unlike his. (Alberico Gentili, *de Legationibus* [1594], III.ix)

Since his death in 1527, Machiavelli's thought has been subject to widely differing interpretations. On the one hand, he is credited with the "Machiavellian" doctrine that prudent rulers should shed moral scruples, adopting whatever means are necessary to preserve their state. This doctrine has been evaluated both critically and positively. Machiavelli's early critics claimed that he defended the evil methods of tyrants. Since the nineteenth century, many sympathetic readers have argued that "Machiavellian realism," as they see it, sets out the necessary foundations of stable government or national independence.[1] On the other hand, many early readers argued that Machiavelli's main purpose was to offer advice on how to preserve popular freedoms in republics.[2] More recently, scholars who identify Machiavelli with a wider "civic humanist" tradition have done much to explain these early republican readings. These scholars have not systematically explored Rousseau's assertion that the *Prince* is a "book of republicans." Yet they have made it much harder to read any of Machiavelli's works as straightforward defenses of a politics indifferent to all ends except self-preservation.[3]

Disagreements between "realist" and republican or "civic humanist" readings have dominated Machiavelli scholarship for decades. But remarks made by some

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[1] For examples of the critical view see Anglo 2005. For early examples of the sympathetic view see Hegel 1999 (1800–1802), 553–58; and Fichte 1971 (1807), 400–453. Strauss (1958) regards Machiavelli as a teacher of evil, yet offers a nuanced analysis of the reasons that brought him to these teachings.

[2] Gentili 1924 (1594), III.ix; Spinoza 1958 (1677), V.7; Rousseau 1964 (1762), III.6.409.

[3] Rousseau, 1964 (1762), III.6.409. "Realist" and republican interpretations are not, of course, mutually exclusive. According to Fichte, Machiavelli sought to combine the two ideas: while his ultimate goals were strongly republican, he believed that it was sometimes necessary to use any available methods to preserve republics and national freedoms from monarchist enemies and foreign threats. See Fichte 1971 (1807); and Meinecke's (1998 [1925]) influential exegesis.

of Machiavelli's early readers raise even more fundamental problems of interpreta-
tion. These have, however, received surprisingly little scholarly attention. The re-
marks in question are not idiosyncratic or off the cuff. They are made by a number
of authors who give ample evidence of having read Machiavelli's works with great
care, and who all attribute similar purposes to his writings. The remarks do not
occur in the context of polemical diatribes, unlike interpretations offered by some
of Machiavelli's fiercest critics. Many are found in works authored by some of the
most perceptive readers and thinkers of the sixteenth through eighteenth centu-
ries, including Francis Bacon, Benedict Spinoza, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In
addition to stressing Machiavelli's sympathies with republics and "peoples," these
and other authors make three striking claims that deserve a fuller examination
than they have so far received.

One claim is that Machiavelli should be regarded as a moral and political phi-
losopher. According to Alberico Gentili, an Italian Protestant exile who became
professor of jurisprudence at Oxford, Machiavelli "assumes the role of philoso-
pher" when discussing historical examples, excelling in "that branch of philoso-
phy which deals with morals and politics [*moribus et civitate*]." Gentili compares
Machiavelli's aims with those of ancient philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and
Cicero, who believed that moral philosophy was a necessary foundation of both
statesmanship and citizenship.[4] In 1605 Francis Bacon seconded Gentili's view of
Machiavelli as an exemplary philosophical "politician" and moral thinker. More
than any other recent writer, Bacon suggests, Machiavelli showed that policy was
"a great part of philosophy" and vice versa.[5] Toward the end of the seventeenth
century, the English republican Henry Neville hailed Machiavelli as the most pro-
found moral thinker of modern times. In a dialogue entitled "Plato Redivivus"
(1681) Neville describes "the divine Machiavel" as "the best and most honest" of
political thinkers, who, like the "divine Plato" before him, wrote as a philosophical
"physician" seeking to treat mankind's recurrent moral and political disorders.[6]

The claim that Machiavelli wrote as a moral philosopher is usually linked to
two more specific views that help to explain the claim. One is that unlike writers
whose aims are more polemical and partisan than philosophical, Machiavelli does
not take sides with any sectional interest, or pit "peoples" in an all-out conflict
against "princes" or nobles. In the role of civil physician, he hoped that his writings
would make him "tolerated as an educator and teacher by those who held the tiller
of government" in a *principato* or a republic, so that his advice might help to steer
either government away from ruin.[7] The other view is that Machiavelli wanted to
teach people how to *see through* deceptively good appearances in politics, not how
to *generate* them. According to Bacon, Machiavelli's main ethical problem was one
familiar to ancient philosophers. It often happens that people unwittingly embrace

[4] Gentili 1924 (1594), III.ix–xi, xxi; II.iv–vi.
[5] Bacon 2001 (1605), 67.
[6] Neville attributes aims of moral and religious "renovation" to Machiavelli that suggest that his references to "the divine Machiavel" are not ironic, though they are undoubtedly provocative.
[7] Gentili 1924 (1594), III.ix; Bacon 2001 (1605), 169; Spinoza 1958 (1677), V.7.

unwise or evil courses of action because these appear wise or good. How then can "philosophical" reflections help them to recognize all the "forms and natures of evil" that assume benign colors? Machiavelli's great service, Bacon claims, was not to show that moral standards should be lowered in the light of "what men do." It was to show how to recognize corrupting conduct that goes under decent appearances, so that higher standards may be preserved. The attentive study of how corruption operates behind apparent virtues is, Bacon observes, "one of the best fortifications for honesty and virtue that can be planted." For "as the fable goeth of the basilisk, that if he see you first, you die for it; but if you see him first, he dieth: so it is with deceits and evil arts."[8]

A second striking claim is that Machiavelli purports to uphold the "rule of law" against the "rule of men" as the principal antidote to civil disorders, whether in principalities or republics. James Harrington offers an emphatic version of this claim on the opening pages of his *Oceana* (1656). He expounds an ideal of government according to "ancient prudence," that is, "government de jure . . . an art whereby a civil society of men is instituted and preserved upon the foundation of common right or interest; or, to follow Aristotle and Livy . . . the empire of laws, and not of men." This kind of government, Harrington asserts, "is that which Machiavel (whose books are neglected) is the only politician that has gone about to retrieve." Harrington does not pause to ask why the Florentine's name was widely identified with the unscrupulous wiles of "extraordinary" individual rulers instead of with the rule of law. He simply states what he regards as the correct understanding of Machiavelli's purposes, claiming that among modern writers Machiavelli should be seen as the leading reviver of "ancient" rule-of-law thinking, which held that "the liberty of a commonwealth consists in the empire of her laws, the absence whereof would betray her to the lust of tyrants."[9] Harrington's good friend Neville echoes this claim. He repeatedly invokes the "incomparable Machiavel" to support arguments for upholding the strict rule of law, even when one's aim is to reform or "purge" corrupt forms of government.[10] Building on arguments from the *Discourses* and *Prince*, Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus* defends extensive freedoms of speech and religion, and the equal freedom of all citizens to stand for office. Spinoza describes Machiavelli as a consistent defender of the rule of law who, while canvassing the common opinion that virtuous one-man rulers are needed to cure corruption, ultimately exposes fatal flaws in it.[11]

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[8] Bacon 2001 (1605), 169. In an apocryphal letter, Neville has "Nicolas Machiavel" insist that by laying bare the corrupt maxims "most in vogue" in his times, he did not mean to recommend them, or to reconcile readers to the harsh reality that "de facto the infamy of the breach of Word would quickly be forgotten and pardoned by the World." His "only scope and design is to promote the Interest and welfare of mankind, and the peace and quiet of the world" by exposing the grim realities of moral corruption behind appearances of "greatness," virtue, or religion (Neville 1691, 5–8).

[9] Harrington 1901 (1656), 183–84, 193.

[10] "Plato Redivivus" claims to follow Machiavelli in seeking to "make the law and the judges the only disposers of the liberties of our persons" and to establish distinct "powers and jurisdictions of . . . several councils (wherein the protection of liberty, as Machiavel calls it, it now to be placed)" (Neville 1681, III.20–21).

[11] Spinoza 1958 (1677), VI.4–5, VII.1, X.1, 10; see chap. 11.

A third claim is that in seeking to "renovate" ancient wisdom, Machiavelli drew as much on Greek as on Roman sources, and on Greek philosophy as well as history. Indeed, early readers denied that sharp distinctions can be made between historical and philosophical aspects of Machiavelli's writing, since like many of his favorite ancients he "assumes the role of philosopher" when discussing historical examples. Neville's "Machiavel" acknowledges Greek philosophers among his chief inspirations, while modestly disavowing the capacity to imitate their methods. According to "Plato Redivivus" Machiavelli sought to revive "a wise custom amongst the ancient Greeks" who, "when they found any craziness or indisposition in their several governments, before it broke out into a disease, did repair to the physicians of state . . . and obtained from them some good recipes, to prevent those seeds of distemper from taking root." In its manner of enquiry Neville's text imitates Machiavelli as well as Plato, "the greatest Philosopher, the greatest politician (I had almost said the greatest divine too) that ever lived": his dialogue does not seek "to dispute . . . for victory" but "to discover and find out the truth" by means of familiar, unstudied discourse. Neville treats Machiavelli as the main modern exponent of arguments that he attributes to Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, as well as to the historians "Thucydides, Polybius, Livy or Plutarch."[12] A recent scholar has noted that Bacon selected much of the same canon of ancient historians as Machiavelli, including Livy and Tacitus but also Xenophon, Polybius, and Thucydides, whom Machiavelli "uses and cites . . . as Bacon does."[13] The same scholar omits, however, to point out that Bacon frequently identifies his predecessor's moral teachings with those of Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle. Gentili offers one of the most direct, and tantalizingly unexplained, identifications of this kind. "If our plan," he writes, "is to interpret authors favorably, we shall palliate many faults" in Machiavelli too; "or we shall at least tolerate in him those that we tolerate in Plato, Aristotle, and others who have committed offenses not unlike his."[14]

All these claims characterize Machiavelli's thought in ways that challenge widespread assumptions found in both realist and civic humanist interpretations. While some scholars refer to "Machiavelli's philosophy," few refer to his ethics or moral philosophy.[15] Although recent scholars have emphasized Machiavelli's preference for the rule of laws over the "rule of men," so far none have tried to reconstruct the philosophical reasons for this preference, instead presenting it in conventional or "rhetorical" terms. Moreover, even the most vigorous defenders of the rule-of-law reading remain ambivalent on one point: Machiavelli, they suggest, believed that exceptional individuals must play a key role in founding, ordering, or purging

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[12] Neville 1681, Pref.3, II.3, I.2–3. Neville criticized writers who misinterpreted Plato and Aristotle as defenders of monarchy or tyranny.

[13] Wormald 1993, 223–24, 199.

[14] Gentili 1924 (1594), III.ix. Gentili stresses the value of Greek language and learning throughout the *Legationibus*, paying special attention to Greek practices and judgments about the ethics of war and peace; see Gentili 1924 (1594), I.xviii, III.vii.

[15] For example, see Strauss 1958, 294–98; Skinner 1981, 48–77; Viroli 1998, 11–41, 176–88; de Alvarez 1999, esp. 68–71; and Fischer 2000. Other recent scholars deny that Machiavelli can be called a philosopher; see chap. 1.

polities, if necessary using extralegal means.[16] As for ancient sources, scholars influenced by the work of Leo Strauss frequently compare Machiavelli with Greek writers. Yet they tend to argue that he broke with their main ethical positions, as well as with those of other ancient, theological, and humanist thinkers.[17] Civic humanist readings generally stress Roman sources more than Greek.[18] An exception is J.G.A. Pocock's argument that together with other Renaissance republicans, Machiavelli drew heavily on Aristotle's conception of civic life and the responsibilities of active citizenship. But Pocock's main concern is to identify a few general ideas that were developed by later British and American writers, not to offer a fine-grained interpretation of either Aristotle or Machiavelli. His readings of both authors are therefore too broad-brushed to support claims about the Aristotelian ancestry of Machiavelli's thought.[19]

This book presents an interpretation of Machiavelli's writings that helps to account more fully for all three of the claims just outlined. It explains how early philosophical readers could reasonably see Machiavelli as a fellow moral philosopher who identified the strict rule of laws as the key to avoiding and correcting civil disorders, and who drew extensively on Greek as well as Roman arguments. Once the textual basis for their claims has been clarified, it also becomes clearer why early readers could characterize the *Prince* as an ethical and republican text. None of these readers left detailed commentaries on Machiavelli's writings, though some of them imitated aspects of his manner of writing and endorsed many of his arguments. While the interpretation offered in the present study was originally inspired by some of the readings just set out, in the end I had to work out my own answers to questions posed by early readers. Nonetheless, this is not intended as an interpretation sui generis, but as a renewal of a very old tradition of Machiavelli readership: one that sees him as a moral philosopher whose political theory is based on the rule of law, and whose "manner" and "matter" of writing are heavily indebted to ancient Greek ethics.

Arguments: Philosophical ethics and the rule of law

This book suggests that Machiavelli's positions are closer to those of other humanist republicans than to amoral political realism. But he used ancient sources in

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[16] While defending the view that Machiavelli preferred the rule of laws over that of men, Viroli (1998, 146–47) nonetheless concludes that "The restoration of liberty in a corrupt city" is for Machiavelli "the work of one man alone, not of the laws. . . . Rule of law and rule of men are both essential components of Machiavelli's republican theory."

[17] Some of Machiavelli's Greek sources are explored thoughtfully in Strauss 1958 and de Alvarez 1999.

[18] Skinner (2002, 184) describes Machiavelli as a "neo-Roman theorist" while saying very little about his Greek sources. In a valuable recent study, Eric Nelson (2004) discusses some of the neglected Greek sources of Renaissance and modern republican thinking. Yet his treatment of Machiavelli is brief, and deals specifically with his idea of the republic.

[19] Pocock 1975; see Sullivan's (1992) apposite criticisms. I see no evidence that Machiavelli drew on Aristotle more than other Greek writers. If we let ourselves be guided by Machiavelli's own explicit statements and allusions, it seems likely that his most important ancient—as distinct from Hellenistic—Greek sources predate Aristotle, who himself built on their legacies.

highly individual ways, and urged readers to think critically about humanist and republican conventions that, in his view, had been reduced to vague generalities by the political rhetoric of his own times.[20] All four of his main political works (the *Prince, Art of War, Florentine Histories,* and *Discourses*) contain a strong Socratic element. They do not offer judgments that can be attributed to Machiavelli himself without careful interpretation. Instead they present various opinions commonly expressed by political leaders, religious authorities, or men in the piazza, then proceed to examine them in the light of examples and reflective "reasoning" (*ragionare*). Machiavelli seldom draws unequivocal conclusions at the terminus of his reasonings; he invites readers to make their own judgments. Nevertheless, I argue that Machiavelli himself has very clear and distinctive ethical commitments. These can be identified through a comparative reading of all his main works, not one that starts from a casual reading of the *Prince* and imposes preconceptions about that work on the longer texts.

Machiavelli's ethics may be described as an ethics of self-legislation. A basic premise of all his political works is that human beings have no choice but to establish their own laws and orders, *leggi* and *ordini*, through their own corruptible powers of reasoning. They should expect little help from nature, God, or the natural sciences, but must exercise their free will—always under severe constraints—to impose and uphold fully human orders. The ethical value of free agency is fundamental for Machiavelli's arguments. He treats it as an innate capacity that explains the possibility of human *virtú*, and thus deserves respect (*respetto*, *rispetto*) regardless of the specific ways in which agents exercise it. At the same time, he argues that ordered civil life is impossible unless free agents impose constraints on their own movements, consistent with respect for the freedom of others. Political orders acquire stability when citizens see their own self-imposed constraints as having the quality of *necessità*, a word that has the sense of an ethical imperative or *obligo* for Machiavelli as well as that of physical compulsion. *Leggi*, the laws, are the appropriate form of any ethical or political "necessity" for human beings. In the absence of any other reliable source of authority, the laws must be based on free public *ragionare* and freely authorized by whoever is expected to uphold them.

Starting from these premises, Machiavelli develops a consistent set of arguments about what any political "orderer" (*ordinatore*) must do to acquire and maintain authority among free human agents who have the power to make or unmake their own laws. Against the widespread view that he neglects considerations of justice or subordinates them to self-interest, I argue that justice (*giustizia, iustizia*)—often expressed through paraphrases such as *leggi* or *respetto*—is a fundamental concept in all Machiavelli's writings. This becomes apparent once preconceptions about his views have been set aside in favor of a careful, independent reading. He frequently invokes justice even in the *Prince*, though that work assumes that most readers are too corrupt to be moved by appeals to justice unless these are concealed within arguments from self-interest. Arguing, for example, that princes are strongest when they form transparent, uncoerced contractual ties (*contratto*) with subjects and

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[20] *Discursus*, 106/737.

foreign allies, Machiavelli explains why brute force is seldom enough to under-write political power. "Victories are never so clear," he points out, "that the win-ner does not have to have some respect, especially for justice [*le vittorie non sono mai sí stiette che el vincitore non abbia ad avere qualche respeto, e massime alla iustizia*]."[21] Such views, I argue, form part of the main line of ethical reasoning that runs through all Machiavelli's writings, though often beneath skillfully crafted, surface appearances of amoralism. He makes readers work hard to identify and keep hold of the ethical line in the midst of numerous corrupt opinions also found in his texts, which mimic the unreflective and corrupt opinions found in civil life.

I try to retrieve these arguments by paying close attention to Machiavelli's noto-riously puzzling modes of writing, discussed in Part I ("Contexts"). The arguments are similar, and expressed in nearly identical language, across the four major po-litical works. Part II ("Foundations") starts by reconstructing Machiavelli's critical theory of knowledge, which he develops through the concepts of historical *imi-tazione* and *cognizione* (chap. 3). Chapter 4 offers a close analysis of two of his most important concepts, *necessità* and *virtú*. I argue that previous studies have not fully grasped the demanding normative sense that Machiavelli gave to both concepts. Chapter 5 reappraises his conception of human nature in the light of this read-ing. Part III ("Principles") reconstructs the implicit, ethical reasoning behind his overtly prudential arguments for respecting popular "desires for freedom" and the "limits" of justice (chaps. 6–8). Part III concludes by questioning the standard view that Machiavelli held that "ends justify means" (chap. 9). I try to show that when his statements to this effect are reread in their textual context, it becomes clear that they cannot be taken as straightforward expressions of Machiavelli's own views. On the contrary, he usually presents them as among the widespread, self-serving "opinions" that stand in need of critical examination. Finally, against the backdrop of my interpretation of his ethics, Part IV ("Politics") reexamines Machiavelli's arguments on how to "order" and maintain political authority, both within and among polities (chaps. 10–12).

Although most chapters offer detailed discussions of Machiavelli's historical examples, I understand his main purposes to have been philosophical, and con-cerned primarily with the foundations of *normative* judgments about actions. I ac-knowledge that rhetorical arguments on the one hand, and the attempt to develop empirically well-founded analyses of human conduct on the other, have an impor-tant place in his thought. Both, however, are subservient to a more basic interest in identifying standards and principles of "reasonable" or right action. Machiavelli's criteria of reasonableness or rightness are not exhaustively grounded in empirical analyses or instrumental considerations, that is, judgments about what it takes to achieve particular aims in specific conditions. A philosophically sensitive reading suggests that an adequate understanding of his central normative concepts such as *virtú*, free will, and order depends on imputing capacities to human beings beyond what can be seen or measured, and which furnish standards that may be used critically to evaluate particular ends and actions. This understanding is reflected

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[21] *P*, XXI.90/181.

in how I set out my reading of the texts. Since reflectiveness about the adequate use of concepts is fundamental for Machiavelli's ethical "reasonings," each chapter is organized around key concepts used throughout his works.

The reading presented here seeks to avoid what I see as two equally serious methodological pitfalls. One is to subordinate the interpretation of Machiavelli's texts to the study of wider literary and political contexts while playing down puzzling arguments and idiosyncratic uses of key words that cry out for closer analysis. The other pitfall is to treat textual interpretation as a free-ranging activity, whereby readers express their personal response to a text while offering little in the way of a reasoned account. My argument starts by locating Machiavelli's thought in what I consider to be the most important political and intellectual contexts that influenced his views. But the bulk of the book is concerned with textual exegesis and the analysis of arguments. While my concern is to recover the meaning of Machiavelli's texts, I try to give clear reasons for considering one interpretation as stronger or weaker than another, and to explain my use of textual evidence within or across different works. I have no illusions that this will forestall serious disagreements with my reading. Yet I hope it may provoke more rigorously reasoned debates about how to interpret Machiavelli's writings.

Sources: Greek ethics

The book's main contributions are interpretative and philosophical. But it also seeks to contribute to the history of ideas. My main argument here is that Machiavelli's Greek antecedents have been badly underexamined. Readers can gain a better understanding of his often enigmatic arguments and use of examples if they go back to the ancient Greek and Hellenistic texts he frequently invokes, as well as to Roman and humanist sources. An important part of the work presented in these pages has been to look closely at Machiavelli's use of authors such as Thucydides, Xenophon, and Plutarch, whose works he often cites in his main works on politics, as well as in letters and shorter pieces.[22] Part I identifies some of the most important affinities between his implicit ethical arguments and those found in Greek writings. The affinities relate both to substantive judgments and to formal features

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[22] My interpretation does not oppose Machiavelli's Greek sources to Roman ones. The ancient Greek writers I see as his main models were also models for his Romans. Both Livy and Sallust, for example, took Thucydides as a model in matters of style and often of substance. See Walsh 1963, 21–23, 40–44, 83–85, 105, 206–12; Fornara 1983, 106–7, 175; Bringmann 2007, 118–22. Livy often drew on Polybius, a Greek who lived under the Roman Empire. Cicero was a great admirer of Greek philosophy, writing dialogues on the *Republic* and *Laws* that sought to renovate Plato. While Machiavelli drew broadly on Roman and Greek texts, his main selection can be narrowed down to authors who wrote in one of two main, arguably related traditions: critical philosophical history, tracing its main lineage to Thucydides; and Socratic writing in various genres, best represented by Xenophon, Plato, and Plutarch. It seems unlikely that he or his humanist contemporaries would have accepted sharp distinctions between Greek and Roman approaches, or the oppositions sometimes posited today between, say, Thucydides and Plato or Cicero and Tacitus.

of his arguments, including many of his key evaluative concepts and oppositions. More cautiously, I suggest similarities with arguments found in Plato's dialogues.

This lacuna in the Machiavelli scholarship is so large and persistent that one might expect to discover good reasons for it. One possible reason is simply a lack of clear evidence that Machiavelli read Greek. But by the same token, there is no firm evidence that he did not.[23] Even if his Greek was poor or non-existent, the writings of Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch—though possibly not of Polybius—were all available to him in Latin translation, and in some cases in Tuscan vernacular. I consider it unlikely, however, that a writer of Machiavelli's outstanding literary and linguistic talents would not have consulted the original Greek of works he mentions and "imitates," even if he first encountered them through translations.

Another rationale might be that Machiavelli did not express anything like the same admiration for Greek political models, whether Athenian or Spartan, as he did for ancient Rome.[24] This view assumes that Machiavelli's most important judgments relate to concrete political practices rather than general standards, and focus on what ancient practices got right, not on what they got wrong. But Machiavelli's appraisals of ancient works do not deal only, or even mainly, with examples of excellence. They are just as concerned with the causes of disorders, and with the corruption of sound standards of judgment as well as of institutions. The same can be said of his favorite Roman authors. Livy, Sallust, and Tacitus were not primarily eulogists of Rome, but critical analysts of the causes that corrupted the Roman republic's once virtuous orders. These Romans drew heavily on the concepts, judgments, and literary genres developed by Greek writers. Machiavelli's grim analysis of contemporary conditions in his native city, Florence, has many similarities with Thucydides', Xenophon's, or Plato's critical analyses of Athens' self-destructive democracy. His analysis of fratricidal conflicts between different Italian cities draws heavily on Athenian authors and on Plutarch, a Greek who, living under the Roman empire, looked back on his country's former glories and self-inflicted disasters.

Yet another possible explanation for the neglect of Machiavelli's Greek sources turns on the problematic distinction between philosophy and history. The view that Machiavelli "attacks" or is hostile to Greek philosophy is frequently asserted in the scholarly literature, although in my view no persuasive case has yet been offered to support it.[25] As I argue in chapter 1, the assertion often rests on a questionable account of the main intellectual contexts that helped to shape Machiavelli's thinking.

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[23] Mansfield conjectures that Machiavelli deliberately concealed his knowledge of Greek, "playfully extinguishing the preceding philosophical sect and perverting the memory of antiquity *a suo modo*" and thus liberating the Romans and their imitators from their "tutelage to Greek political philosophy" (1979, 206). I find the deliberate-concealing thesis plausible, although my reading challenges the argument that Machiavelli broke with the Socratic tradition.

[24] See Gilbert 1965, 203–8, and the remarks on Roman and Greek sources of the republican tradition in Pettit 1997, 285–86.

[25] Strauss (1958) outlines a fascinating case, but does not flesh it out with detailed comparisons of Machiavelli and Greek philosophers.

The most serious error is to presume that Florentine and Italian humanism *tout court* was concerned to promote the *vita activa* above the *vita contemplativa*, where the former is identified with politics or rhetoric, and the latter with philosophy. This picture of humanist thinking about the relation between politics and philosophy stands in urgent need of reappraisal. I further question the assumption that since Machiavelli does not call himself a philosopher, and did not write scholastic treatises that explicitly distinguish philosophical subject-matter from historical and political themes, he must have had little interest in anything that would have been recognized in his times as philosophy—especially Greek philosophy.[26] The Greeks he admired philosophized about ethics and politics through historical and biographical writing (Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Plutarch's *Lives*), characterless "discourses" in the form of essays (Xenophon, Plutarch's essays), dialogues on political matters (parts of Thucydides' histories, Xenophon's *Hiero*, Plato's *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*), and other genres that clearly differed from scholastic treatises or commentaries. The content of these ancient writings was recognized as philosophical by readers such as Gentili, Bacon, Neville, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Rousseau,[27] who apprehended similar philosophical purposes in Machiavelli's partly imitative works—which include a philosophical history modeled on Thucydides as well as Livy (the *Florentine Histories*), a collection of numerous short essay-like *discorsi* (the *Discourses*), and a long dialogue (the *Art of War*).

The problem of Machiavelli's relations with Plato and various branches of Platonism has been almost entirely neglected in the scholarly literature, notwithstanding the parallels alluded to by Machiavelli's early philosophical readers. The subject is at once potentially rich and a hazardous minefield for any scholar who remains unconvinced—as I do—by textbook oppositions between Machiavelli's alleged realism and empiricism and a strongly transcendentalist interpretation of Plato's idealism. Textbook oppositions often sound plausible to people who lack the time or interest to read difficult works with the care they demand.[28] They add interesting dramatic tension to what might otherwise be much duller surveys of the history of ideas, and thus come to be valued as expository or teaching tools. But even plausible or interesting accounts of the relations between authors need to be evaluated by close, reasoned readings of their texts, and by independent judgments about their content. This book is about Machiavelli, and it is quite long enough without any further examination of how my interpretation might challenge preconceptions

[26] Felix Gilbert (1965, 193) states that "Machiavelli was not a philosopher. He intended neither to outline a philosophical system nor to introduce new philosophical terms." Gilbert's definition of philosophy here is unduly narrow. If these were its definitive features, the entire tradition of Socratic philosophy discussed in chap. 1 must be considered as non-philosophy.

[27] See Hobbes' (1989 [1629], 570–86) remarks on Thucydides' philosophical education under Anaxagoras, who was also Socrates' mentor, and the historian's commitment to non-partisan truth in "Of the Life and History of Thucydides." Unlike the others in this list, Hobbes does not explicitly acknowledge Machiavelli as an inspiration for his own arguments. But an examination of their use of ancient—and especially Greek—sources might suggest the need for further comparative studies of Machiavelli and Hobbes; see Conclusions.

[28] The present author has often been such a person, not least when pressures to write quickly or to teach fast-paced courses on the history of ideas left precious little time to read.

about his affinities with Plato's philosophy. I do, however, consider this an extremely fruitful area for future research. To avoid introducing such a controversial set of side issues into the main text, I have consigned many of my direct comparisons between Machiavelli and Plato to footnotes, where I hope they might nonetheless stimulate further thought and argument.

The proposal that Greek sources provide an indispensable key to reading Machiavelli is by no means an elegant solution to all the puzzling features of his writing. Some of the original Greek texts discussed here are as ambiguous as Machiavelli's own renovations. In saying that highly problematic works such as Thucydides' histories, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and *Hiero*, or Plato's *Statesman* or *Laws* provide a key to Machiavelli's enigmas, I certainly do not mean that they supply clear-cut answers that can resolve interpretative debates once and for all. Fortunately for future generations of readers, it is most unlikely that any interpretation of Machiavelli's endlessly intriguing texts will ever be regarded as definitive. Debates will rage on, but perhaps they will take on new dimensions if we examine Machiavelli's ancient sources more closely, along with his humanist contexts. Until we have a fuller appraisal of these sources, we will fail to appreciate the extent to which later thinkers who built on his ideas, such as Harrington, Spinoza, and Rousseau, saw a revival of ancient ethical traditions as necessary for "modern" enlightenment. Instead of regarding Machiavelli as a late humanist whose ideas represent the waning of Renaissance enthusiasm for ancient teachings, they saw him as what might be called a critical humanist: one who pointed out many corrupt features of humanist thought in his own time, including corrupt and self-serving uses of ancient models, and who offered a fresh reconstruction of very ancient teachings about political order and virtue. This is the view defended in this work.