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Leo Strauss on the Machiavellian Moment(s) in Aristotle

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Introduction

Strauss's relation to Machiavelli is ambiguous and hotly contested. While Shadia Drury argues that "Strauss used Machiavelli as his mouthpiece in order to avoid pronouncing unpleasant, unsalutary and dangerous truths in his own name,"[1] Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert emphatically counter Drury's assertion, stating that "Strauss, in a word, is no Machiavellian."[2] Despite this disagreement, there is widespread consent among both his critics and his admirers that Strauss sees Machiavelli as the originator of modernity, as the "greater Columbus, who had discovered the continent" on which modern political philosophy is based.[3] Most readers take Strauss's claim concerning Machiavelli as the originator of modernity at face value. Likely, Strauss would applaud this conventional agreement, as he believed there are certain truths inherent in the surface-level readings of texts. Nevertheless, he also saw such surface-level readings as limited and advocated reading the texts of the greatest philosophers closely on the grounds that some wrote esoterically.

Because Strauss saw political writings as containing various levels of truth, and his own *Thoughts on Machiavelli* seems to be strewn with contradictory statements, we may need to question whether an interpretation of Strauss's works that sees Machiavelli as the straight-forward founder of modernity is not, perhaps, too simple. In a review of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Willmoore Kendall quipped that he would have to "give six months of his life

a goodbye kiss" to do full justice to the "'new' Machiavelli that Strauss conjures up for us out of the cryptograms."[4] Through a comparison of Strauss's writings on Machiavelli and Aristotle—with a particular focus on Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli* and *The City and Man*—this article highlights the many areas of convergence that Strauss saw in the thought of these two political philosophers, who seem on the surface to be very different from each other.

This article proceeds in four parts. In the first, I analyze Strauss's understanding of Machiavellian and Aristotelian cosmology and the extent to which their cosmology affects their conclusions as to man's natural sociality. Next, I look at the role Strauss sees chance or fortune (Fortuna) playing in Machiavellian and Aristotelian political philosophy and examine the moral response that Strauss sees each philosopher as advocating in response to the difficulties posed by chance or fortune. In the third part, I discuss Strauss's understanding of the relationship between philosophy and politics as depicted by Machiavelli and Aristotle, before turning in the fourth part to Strauss's comments on the mode of presentation each thinker adopted. In each part, I show that Strauss believed there to be a great deal of similarity between the political thought of Aristotle and Machiavelli. Finally, I conclude with some tentative speculation as to why Strauss chose to present this similarity esoterically. The upshot of my analysis is that it enables us to ascend from the conventional characterization of Strauss's understanding of the relationship between Machiavelli and Aristotle to a more nuanced account.[5] It is my hope that my analysis will shed light, no matter how dim, on Strauss's project, allowing us to view it in a new way (cf. *TM*, 295).

Cosmology and the Sociability of Man

The fundamental distinction between ancients and moderns with which Strauss is often associated is developed in *Natural Right and History*, which has been described as "Strauss's popular statement par excellence."[6] In this work Strauss makes the case that the ancients, a category including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, can be

distinguished from the moderns on the basis of their belief that man is by nature a political animal. Strauss develops this insight through a discussion of the natural pleasures associated with living in community. While the ancients believed the good to be distinct from, and more fundamental than, the pleasant, Strauss argues that they nevertheless recognized that the underlying basis of pleasure, or the "channels within which pleasure can move," manifests a being's natural constitution: "the pleasures of an ass differ from the pleasures of a human being" (*NRH*, 126). Strauss contends that for the ancients the hierarchy of desires of any particular being reveals its natural constitution. A being's natural constitution, in turn, has a corresponding operation or work. If the work of a being is done well, then the being will be good; it will be "in order" (*NRH*, 127). By looking to the natural constitution of a human being, the ancients determined the "natural human good."

The hierarchy of desires the ancients saw as supplying the basis for natural right dictates that "man is by nature a social being" (*NRH*, 129) and that he cannot be good—that is, he cannot live well—except by living with others. Strauss makes clear, however, that for the ancients, man's sociality is not the product of "a calculation of the pleasures which he expects from association"; instead, man "derives pleasure from association because he is by nature social" (*NRH*, 129). In "An Epilogue," Strauss specifically identifies Aristotle as a proponent of man's sociality: "according to the Aristotelian view, man is a being *sui generis*, with a dignity of its own: man is the rational and political animal" (*LAM*, 207). Thus, for Strauss, the ancients, and Aristotle in particular, saw man as a social being.

In contrast to his presentation of the ancients, Strauss does not, in *Natural Right and History*, discuss the moderns as a single entity. Instead, he presents each modern thinker in his own right. Nevertheless, Strauss makes clear that the moderns do agree on certain basic premises. For example, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke all base their political philosophy on the belief that man is by nature an apolitical or asocial animal. Machiavelli, Strauss informs us, takes an "anti-idealistic view, if not

of the whole, at any rate of the origins of mankind or of civil society" (*NRH*, 178). Similarly, Strauss writes that Hobbes "accepts [the] view that man is by nature or originally an a-political and even an a-social animal" (*NRH*, 169). Last, Strauss writes that "Locke's entire political teaching is based on the assumption of a state of nature" (*NRH*, 215), which is not a state of sociality but a state in which "any man may do what he thinks fit" (*NRH*, 224–28). According to Strauss, each of these modern thinkers denies man's natural sociability. In *Natural Right and History*, the fundamental disagreement between classical and modern political philosophy is presented as hinging on man's natural sociability, and Strauss suggests that Machiavelli makes the decisive turn away from the classical political thought of Aristotle and others.

At first glance, Strauss's fuller treatment of the political thought of Machiavelli and Aristotle—in particular in *Thoughts on Machiavelli* and *The City and Man*—seems to straightforwardly confirm the distinction between ancients and moderns that he draws in *Natural Right and History*. Specifically, Strauss seems to suggest that the distinct cosmologies provided by Machiavelli and Aristotle—that is, their distinct accounts of the whole and man's place within it—are, if not supportive of, at least congruent with their respective conclusions concerning the sociability of man. However, as we will see, Strauss subtly suggests that the cosmology of Aristotle and Machiavelli are not, in fact, so different as they initially appear, and, as a result, their respective conclusions concerning the extent of man's natural sociability are not so different either.

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss writes that Machiavelli's "demand for a 'realistic' political philosophy" was justified by "reflections on the foundations of civil society, and this means ultimately by reflections on the whole within which man lives" (*NRH*, 178). Machiavelli's political philosophy, argues Strauss, is reflective of his cosmology. Thus, to understand the political philosophy of Machiavelli fully—along with his claim that man is naturally asocial—it is necessary to first examine his cosmology, which Strauss discusses at length in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.

Strauss begins his elucidation of Machiavelli's cosmology by citing Book II of the *Discourses*, where Machiavelli quotes Polybius, writing, "In the beginning of the world, the inhabitants being scarce, men lived for some time dispersed in similitude to the beasts" (*TM*, 201). Strauss points out that this statement, which implies that man is an asocial being, is supplemented by repeated assertions that the universe and human nature have always remained the same. He quotes the following from Machiavelli's *Discourses*: "I judge that the world has always been in the same manner and there has been (always) as much good as there has been evil" (*TM*, 202). For Strauss, these statements indicate that Machiavelli endorsed the "Epicurean" notion of the "beginning of the world," which presupposes the eternity of "matter" (*TM*, 201). The belief in the eternity of matter, of course, necessitates the belief that there is no efficient cause of the world and, therefore, "there is no place in [Machiavelli's] cosmology for a ruling Mind" (*TM*, 221), or a teleological conception of the world. Thus, according to Strauss, Machiavelli's cosmology is mechanistic rather than teleological, and his "realistic political philosophy" is adopted in response to this cosmology.

The view that Strauss takes of Aristotle's cosmology and of its similarity to Machiavelli's cosmology is difficult to pin down. In *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss initially indicates a similarity between the two thinkers' understanding of cosmology before suggesting that they are nevertheless distinct. He writes, "We have stated the reasons which may induce one to think that Machiavelli's cosmological premises were Aristotelian" (*TM*, 221). The footnote accompanying this statement directs the reader to an earlier section of the book, where Strauss discusses Machiavelli's cosmology, which was described above as Epicurean—meaning, that is, that it recognizes no efficient cause (*TM*, 201–2). This footnote suggests Strauss believes the cosmology of both Machiavelli and Aristotle to be Epicurean. To be sure, after suggesting Aristotle's cosmology is similar to that of Machiavelli, Strauss appears to distinguish their respective cosmologies. He writes, "Machiavelli indicates his fundamental disagreement with

Aristotle's doctrine of the whole by substituting 'chance' (*caso*) for 'nature' in the only context in which he speaks of 'the beginning of the world'" (*TM*, 222). By doing so, argues Strauss, "Machiavelli indicates that he has abandoned the teleological understanding of nature and natural necessity for the alternative understanding" (*TM*, 222).[7]

However, in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss indicates that Aristotle's cosmology is also mechanistic. He writes that Aristotle "seems to have . . . decided in favor of the nonteleological conception of the universe" (*NRH*, 8). Furthermore, the footnote accompanying this statement directs us to a passage in Aristotle's *Physics*, in which Aristotle responds to those who ascribe the coming into being of "the heavenly sphere and all the worlds to spontaneity" or chance.[8] Aristotle's investigation of this view is, perhaps purposefully, turgid and difficult to follow, and yet it seems clear that he was open to the possibility that the cosmos was the product of either spontaneity or chance (however defined) and was therefore possibly mechanistic in character. Thus, the fundamental disagreement Strauss sees between Machiavelli and Aristotle cannot consist in the former's abandonment of a teleological understanding of nature, since Strauss indicates, though he does not demonstrate, that Aristotle had decided in favor of the non-teleological conception of the universe.

Despite the similarity Strauss sees between the cosmologies of Machiavelli and Aristotle, it might be maintained that he believes the degree to which their respective cosmologies affect their political philosophy differentiates their teaching. While Strauss is clear that Machiavelli's "realistic political philosophy" is adopted in response to his understanding of the whole, he asserts that Aristotle's cosmology "is unqualifiedly separable from the quest for the best political order" (*CM*, 21). As Strauss presents it, Aristotle has a teleological conception of politics—implied by the notion of the "best political order"—that is not influenced by what Strauss claims is Aristotle's non-teleological conception of the whole, whereas Machiavelli's political philosophy is entirely dependent on his mechanistic view of whole.

A close parsing of Strauss's statement, however, reveals that it does not specify a *necessary* separation between Aristotle's cosmology and his political philosophy. Instead, Strauss merely states the two are "unqualifiedly separable," or *capable* of being separated, not that they *are* separate. As we will see, Strauss indicates that Aristotle's cosmology has profound implications for his political philosophy, much in the way that Machiavelli's cosmology causes him to adopt a "realistic political philosophy."

Strauss's characterization of Aristotle's political philosophy initially appears to be vastly different from his depiction of Machiavelli's political philosophy. These apparent differences are evident in Strauss's exposition of how political life emerges in the thought of each thinker. In *The City and Man*, Strauss introduces Aristotle's remarks on the emergence of the city in terms that echo what is written in *Natural Right and History*. He writes, "For Aristotle . . . the city is natural to man; in founding cities men only execute what their nature inclines them to do. Men are by nature inclined to the city because they are by nature inclined to happiness" (*CM*, 41). In fact, Strauss goes so far as to assert that "the highest good of the city (happiness) is the same as the highest good of the individual" (*CM*, 31). Strauss presents Aristotle's political philosophy as one in which the individual is naturally predisposed to the city because his *telos* is the same as the city. We are left with the provisional impression that Strauss saw Aristotle as favoring a teleological conception of man while maintaining a mechanistic cosmology.

In contrast, as Strauss reports it, Machiavelli's writings present no account of the good life as described by Aristotle. Instead, man is described as naturally "dispersed" at the beginning of the world. After having introduced Machiavelli's beliefs regarding the natural asocial character of man, Strauss goes on to "bring out the difference between Machiavelli and Aristotle" by considering "Machiavelli's doctrine regarding God and his attributes" (*TM*, 208). Strauss writes that while Machiavelli's *Discourses* are "in the decisive respect silent about God, they make significant assertions regarding heaven," according to which the heavens are "tacitly

identifie[d]" with Fortuna (*TM*, 209). Fortuna seems to be substituted for God. However, Strauss later tells us that Machiavelli also presents Fortuna as "the all comprehensive order which does not think and will, or as nature." (*TM*, 217). Fortuna undergoes a further transformation a few pages later; she is for Machiavelli not simply equivalent to nature but is instead described as man's interaction with nature. Strauss writes:

> Fortuna is thought to be the cause of men's good or ill fortunes. But if one looks more closely, one sees that in the most important cases "the cause of (good) fortune" is not Fortuna but human virtue and good institutions, i.e., the work of prudence or art. . . . Conversely, the cause of misfortune is frequently not Fortuna, but lack of virtue. (*TM*, 217)

Machiavelli, argues Strauss, equates political virtue or political institutions with good fortune, thereby implying that man creates his own good fortune through his own excellence and the institutions he creates.

As Strauss presents it, Machiavelli believes that the extent to which man is able to control "nature and necessity" is the extent to which he is virtuous. Thus, while both Aristotle and Machiavelli have a teleological conception of man, according to which he can develop his capacity for excellence, the impetus for this development differs. Whereas Aristotle locates this impetus in man's natural sociality, for Machiavelli it is "necessity which makes men operate well" and makes them good (*TM*, 248–49). The original condition, in which man is "naturally dispersed" and subject to the "original terror," compels man "to form societies in order to live in peace and security" (*TM*, 249). Necessity causes men to join together and found cities. Strauss writes that for Machiavelli, this necessity means "civil society cannot even aspire to be simply just. . . . [C]ivil society has its root not in justice but in injustice" (*NRH*, 179). All of the foregoing seem to suggest that Strauss regards Machiavelli's political philosophy as vastly different from that of Aristotle. While Strauss presents Aristotle as suggesting that

man is by nature sociable and inclined toward political life, he depicts Machiavelli's political philosophy as one in which man is inherently asocial and cities are formed by virtue of necessity.

Perhaps, though, these two political philosophies are not as distinct for Strauss as they at first appear. Indeed, as Zuckert and Zuckert note in their commentary on *The City and Man*, when Strauss writes that for Aristotle the city is natural for man, he

> does not seem to mean a natural inclination in the direct and obvious sense, such as in the claim that men are inclined by nature toward food. . . . As Strauss presents it, there is an intermediate variable: "Men are by nature inclined to the city because they are by nature inclined to happiness." . . . The inclination to happiness is primary over the inclination to the city.[9]

This seems to suggest that the city is perhaps only incidental to—or a by-product of—man's natural inclination to happiness. Such an interpretation receives added credence from the fact that Strauss does not unqualifiedly state that for Aristotle the city is the only way in which man can develop his full potential. He writes, "The city, *one is tempted to say*, is the only association which is capable of being dedicated to the life of excellence" (*CM*, 41, emphasis added). Strauss's qualified statement implies he is not convinced that Aristotle saw the city as the only conduit through which man can perfect his nature or achieve happiness.

That Strauss sees Aristotle as teaching that man can achieve happiness in another, more perfect way is made explicit later in *The City and Man*. Strauss asserts that for Aristotle, "the highest end of the individual is contemplation," which the city is capable of only in an "analogous sense" (*CM*, 49). Strauss is not convinced that Aristotle sees the city as natural for all men. It is from this perspective that we need to reevaluate Strauss's assertion that Aristotle's "cosmology is unqualifiedly separable from his quest for the best political order" (*CM*, 21). Indeed, while Aristotle's cosmology may be separable from his quest for the best political order, it is not

necessarily separate from man's highest end. Instead, Strauss implies, there is a link between Aristotle's cosmology and his understanding of the end of man, which is in the fullest sense identical not with the social life of the city but with the life of contemplation. Thus, the cosmologies of Machiavelli and Aristotle have an important bearing on their respective political philosophies, or on their view concerning the natural sociability of man. Strauss suggests that the manner in which the city comes into being according to Aristotle is perhaps not so different from the way it comes into being according to Machiavelli.

The Moral Virtues: The Relationship between Fortuna and Natural Right

In addition to the similarities Strauss sees between the cosmology of Aristotle and that of Machiavelli, he indicates there is another, related element of congruity in their political thought. Specifically, he suggests that the extent to which nature, or chance, plays a role in man's ability to achieve happiness or excellence is strikingly similar for each thinker. Furthermore, he indicates that Aristotle and Machiavelli each promote a similar ethical response to the original condition or natural situation in which man finds himself.

Initially, it appears that Strauss sees a distinction between Aristotle's and Machiavelli's respective understanding of nature. As he presents it, Aristotle's political thought shows "a natural harmony between the whole [i.e., the cosmos] and the human mind" that is absent in the political thought of Machiavelli (*CM*, 41). Nature gives evidence of this harmony, for according to Aristotle, "nature has made, if not all animals, at least most of them for the sake of man" (*CM*, 41). In contrast, as depicted by Strauss, Machiavelli maintains that man was originally in a state of necessity and associates with others solely to conquer this necessity. Strauss's depiction of the congruity in Aristotle between nature and man (i.e., that nature provides for man) and the apparent lack of such congruity that he sees in Machiavelli's political philosophy provides further evidence that he views the political philosophy of these two thinkers as substantially distinct.

Strauss, however, does not stop at merely observing the "natural harmony" between man and nature that exists for Aristotle. Instead, he goes on to suggest that Aristotle's optimism regarding this congruity is perhaps unwarranted. He notes that for Aristotle, "the nature of man is enslaved in many ways" (*CM*, 41). This enslavement, which does "not originate in human folly" but is instead a brute condition of the world, ensures that "only very few, and even these not always, can achieve happiness or the highest freedom of which man is by nature capable" (*CM*, 41). Strauss follows this up with the observation that the city "dedicated to human excellence is, to say the least, very rare" and that "chance rather than human reason seems to be responsible for the various laws laid down by men" (*CM*, 41–42). Chance thus plays an important role in Aristotle's political philosophy, according to Strauss. He treats Aristotle's discussion as implying that "nature is not a kind mother but a harsh stepmother to man" (*CM*, 42). The incongruence between man and nature serves to reinforce the conclusion drawn earlier; Strauss does not present Aristotle's cosmology as teleological.

In any case, that Strauss views nature or chance as playing an important role in man's ability to achieve happiness or excellence in Aristotle's political philosophy is analogous to Strauss's understanding of the role played by Fortuna in Machiavelli's political philosophy. Machiavelli, argues Strauss, saw Fortuna or chance as that which provides the impetus for the manifestation of human excellence or human goodness.[10] That nature or Fortuna has left man in an original condition of terror is not, for Machiavelli, the final word on the matter. Rather, this condition provides the means for man to express his excellence. As characterized by Strauss, both Aristotle and Machiavelli see Fortuna, chance, or nature as playing a decisive role in man's ability to achieve human excellence.

It may be objected that though Strauss sees similarities in the role that chance or Fortuna plays in the political thought of Aristotle and Machiavelli, he nevertheless thinks that each thinker advocates vastly different ethical responses to the difficult situation

posed by the harsh condition of nature. At first glance, Strauss seems to suggest that Aristotle's conception of virtue and vice is polar opposite to that of Machiavelli. Strauss writes, for example, that while the classic expression of virtue is found in "Aristotle's assertion that virtue, being the opposite of vice, is the middle or mean between two faulty extremes" (*TM*, 237), Machiavelli "tacitly rejects [this] view" (*TM*, 238).

As Strauss goes on to develop Machiavelli's conception of virtue and vice in greater detail, however, it becomes apparent that for Strauss, Machiavelli's conception is not so different from that of Aristotle. Strauss writes:

> What Machiavelli means to convey [concerning virtue and vice] can be stated as follows. The two opposite defects are merely two aspects of one and the same vice which comes to sight in opposite forms in opposite circumstances; one does not understand either defect if one does not see in each the co-presence of the other. The virtue in question on the other hand comes to sight as one and same in all situations; it is stable and unchanging, for it is based on "knowledge of the world." (*TM*, 238)

This description of Machiavelli's understanding of virtue and vice seems to be the mirror image of Aristotle's teaching, according to which the middle course between two vices is the salutary one.[11] Aristotle recognized that circumstances vary and, as a result, one will need to incline toward one vice or the other, depending on the circumstances. Thus, for Aristotle, even though circumstances vary and may require different actions to achieve the middle course, the character of these actions is always one of virtuosity. One may say, therefore, that for Aristotle virtue is "stable and unchanging." That Strauss sees a similarity in Machiavelli's and Aristotle's accounts of virtue and vice is made clear when he quotes Aristotle in discussing Machiavelli's counsel to alternate between virtue and vice. Strauss writes, "The alternation [between virtue and vice] consists in choosing virtue or vice with a view to

what is appropriate 'for whom, toward whom, when and where'" (*TM*, 241).

Before concluding his account of Machiavelli's ethical teaching, Strauss turns to Machiavelli's discussion of the "most excellent man" (*TM*, 243). He writes, "Machiavelli seems to admit a *summum bonum*; he praises the pagans for having seen the highest good in worldly honor or, more precisely, in 'greatness of mind, strength of the body and all other things which are apt to make men most strong'" (*TM*, 243). According to Strauss, Machiavelli describes Agathocles as possessing all the qualities that make men strong, except for moral virtue. The consequences of this lack of moral virtue, according to Strauss's interpretation, meant that Agathocles "could acquire empire but not glory" (*TM*, 243). As Strauss sees it, Machiavelli implies that while Agathocles "cannot be judged inferior to any most excellent captain . . . his vices and crimes do not permit that he be counted among the most excellent men" (*TM*, 243). Thus, argues Strauss, Machiavelli sees one as incapable of attaining the *summum bonum* unless he has the moral virtues in addition to "greatness of mind" and "strength of body."

Although Machiavelli recognized that the moral virtues are indispensable for being a "most excellent man," Strauss argues that he was simultaneously aware that "no man is complete; a 'universal man' is an imagined being" (244). Of course, Aristotle and other ancients were realists enough to understand that perfect happiness is unattainable and that no man has the whole of virtue.[12] Thus, it seems that Strauss uses this discussion of Agathocles to tacitly signal that Machiavelli's conception of virtue and vice is not altogether different from that of classical political philosophy. Indeed, immediately after his discussion of Agathocles, Strauss sums up his discussion of Machiavelli's understanding of virtue and vice with the following thoughts:

> Machiavelli rejects the mean to the extent to which the notion of the mean is linked up with the notions of a perfect happiness that excludes all evil and of the simply perfect human being or of the "universal man" and therefore with

> the notion of a most perfect being simply which possesses all perfections most eminently and hence cannot be the cause of evil. (*TM*, 244)

Since Aristotle was eminently aware that "perfect happiness" is unattainable and that there is no "simply perfect human being" or "universal man," Strauss seems to be arguing that Machiavelli's rejection of a conception of the mean that is "linked up with [such] notions" simply cannot be the rejection of Aristotle's conception of the mean. Machiavelli's rejection is instead the rejection of a type of idealistic mean that is foreign to Aristotle. Accordingly, Strauss's understanding of Machiavelli's conception of virtue and vice appears, in certain important respects, to be quite similar to that of Aristotle.

Of course, it may be countered that Strauss believes Aristotle adheres to a conception of natural right, whereas Machiavelli does not. However, a close analysis of Strauss's account of Aristotelian natural right suggests that he regards it to be somewhat malleable in a way that prevents us from flatly distinguishing Aristotelian and Machiavellian political thought on the basis of natural right. Describing Aristotle's account of natural right, Strauss writes, "A right which necessarily transcends political society, he gives us to understand, cannot be the right natural to man, who is by nature a political animal" (*NRH*, 156). Aristotle, argues Strauss, examines natural right "in the twilight which is essential to human life as merely human," and in such twilight, "the justice which may be available in the cities appears to be perfect justice and unquestionably good" (*NRH*, 157). Thus, only by viewing things in the twilight do they appear to be just.

In addition, Strauss notes that for Aristotle "all natural right is changeable" (*NRH*, 157). The reason, he argues, is because in certain extreme situations, when the very existence of society is at stake, the requirements of justice may licitly be superseded by conditions of necessity such that they remain compatible with natural right. Strauss interprets the "changeability" of natural right for Aristotle thus: "When speaking of natural right, Aristotle does not primarily think of any general propositions but rather of concrete

decisions. . . . Justice and natural right reside . . . in concrete decisions rather than in general rules" (*NRH*, 159). Such a conception of justice seems to comport well with Machiavelli's description of virtuosity, according to which virtue remains stable, despite the fact that differing circumstances call for differing actions. As Strauss notes, though natural right is, for Aristotle, "obviously mutable," "one can hardly deny that in all concrete decisions general principles [i.e., virtuosity] are implied and presupposed" (*NRH*, 159).

Various commentators have recognized the compatibility of Machiavellian morality with Aristotelian natural right as described by Strauss. Zuckert and Zuckert, for example, recognize that "Machiavelli's emphasis on necessity and the amoral foundation and prerequisites of morality in the extreme case converges with Aristotle's doctrine as interpreted by Strauss that there are no ineluctably valid moral rules."[13] Nonetheless, they maintain that Strauss sees Aristotle's conception of justice as distinct from that of Machiavelli. According to Zuckert and Zuckert, Strauss recognized an important difference between Aristotle and Machiavelli. Aristotle tolerated actions that "fall beneath or outside the standards of normal morality . . . [but] such practices and necessities were not the rule." Machiavelli, in contrast, "takes his bearings by the extreme case."[14]

Zuckert and Zuckert are correct in noting that Strauss saw a distinction between Aristotle and Machiavelli based on the situations by which they take their bearings. However, that Strauss saw this distinction as having any impact on the practical effects of their morality remains unclear. For example, at one point Strauss introduces Machiavelli's understanding of virtue by noting that Machiavelli distinguishes between virtue and goodness to "indicate the difference between republican virtue and moral virtue" (*TM*, 257). We are led to assume that Machiavelli "substitute[s] . . . republican virtue for moral virtue" and that moral virtue is suprapolitical in a way that republican virtue is not (*TM*, 257–58). However, as Strauss continues, it becomes clear that he regards both Plato and Aristotle as being wedded to republican virtue equally as much as Machiavelli. Indeed, he writes that in the

Republic Plato demanded that "the guardians of the city be savage toward strangers" (*TM*, 258). Strauss points out that while Aristotle does not make a similar demand, he does refrain from reproving Plato for "not having forced [the luxurious city] to restore the land which it had taken from its neighbors in order to lead a life of luxury" (*TM*, 258). On this basis, Strauss concludes that "cruelty towards strangers cannot be avoided by the best of citizens as citizens" and that "'the factual truth' of moral virtue is republican virtue" (*TM*, 258). In sum, no substitution of republican virtue for moral virtue has, in fact, taken place. Machiavelli, Strauss subtly suggests, is simply restating—perhaps more boldly—that which was already recognized by the ancients.

Strauss's insinuation that Machiavelli's morality bears more than a little congruity with that of the ancients become more pronounced when he discusses Machiavelli's defense of the fatherland. It will be recalled that Strauss interpreted Aristotle's understanding of natural right as permitting the abeyance of the principles of commutative and distributive justice when public safety is at stake (*NRH*, 160). Strauss interprets Machiavelli as similarly saying that "when the existence of the fatherland is at stake, one ought not to be concerned with justice or injustice" (*TM*, 258–59). Strauss seems to believe that both political philosophers view the "moral modes of action [as] the ordinary modes, . . . whereas the immoral modes are the extraordinary ones, the modes required only in extraordinary cases" (*TM*, 259). In sum, while Strauss may have seen Machiavelli—in contrast to Aristotle—as taking his bearings by the extreme case, he did not see this as greatly affecting their respective understandings of morality.[15]

Philosophy, Politics, and the Priority of the Soul

While Strauss may have understood Machiavelli and Aristotle as having similar accounts of moral virtue, one might nevertheless object that he saw between the two thinkers a fundamental difference on whether the soul and the activity that most perfects it, philosophy, ought to take priority over politics. Again, on the surface, Strauss suggests that a great gulf separates the two.

He provides a provisional interpretation according to which the modern political philosophers, including Machiavelli, prioritized politics over philosophy and subordinated the interests of the soul to more immediate, practical concerns, whereas the ancients separated politics from philosophy to ensure that philosophy did not assume an instrumental and subordinate role to politics. However, on closer examination, it becomes evident that this distinction does not hold, at least as applied to Aristotle and Machiavelli. Strauss subtly indicates that they understood the relationship between philosophy and politics in strikingly similar ways.

In *The City and Man*, Strauss introduces Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between philosophy and politics by way of discussing the virtue of prudence. For Aristotle, he asserts, prudence enables man to "lead a good life," and Strauss goes on to argue that Aristotle views prudence as a "kind of knowledge which is inseparable from 'moral virtue'" (*CM*, 24). According to Strauss's description of Aristotle's *Ethics*, "prudence and moral virtue united and as it were fused enable a man to lead a good life or the noble life which seems to be the natural end of man" (*CM*, 25). Together, prudence and the moral virtues are essential for man's ability to live well. Strauss continues, however, noting that "the sphere ruled by prudence [i.e., the sphere of politics or of all human things] is closed since the principles of prudence—the ends in the light of which prudence guides man—are known independently of theoretical science" (*CM*, 25). Thus, the political realm is presented as separate from philosophy in such a way that politics does not take its bearings from philosophy.

It may be that precisely because politics is closed and known independently of theorical science that Strauss's characterization of Aristotle's political philosophy distinguishes it from that of Machiavelli. In describing Aristotle's modern critics, Strauss writes the following:

> It does not suffice to say that the new, anti-Aristotelian science of the seventeenth century rejected final causes. What is peculiar to modern thought is not [the conclusion

> that nature is . . . a harsh stepmother to man] but the consequent resolve to liberate man from that enslavement by his own sustained effort. This resolve finds its telling expression in the demand for the "conquest" of nature: nature is understood and treated as an enemy who must be subjugated. Accordingly, science ceases to be proud contemplation and becomes the humble and charitable handmaid devoted to the relief of man's estate. (*CM*, 42)

Strauss's characterization of politics as a "closed sphere" and his description of modern philosophy as having been conscripted into the service of liberating man from the enslavement of nature together suggest he saw modern political philosophers, including perhaps Machiavelli, as seeking to conscript philosophy in the service of politics to relieve man's estate in a way that Aristotle did not.

A closer look, however, reveals that Strauss does not believe the relationship between theoretical science and prudence (or philosophy and politics) to be unqualifiedly separate for either thinker. Strauss writes that according to Aristotle, "the highest end of man by nature is theoretical understanding or philosophy and this perfection does not require moral virtue as moral virtue" (*CM*, 26–27). This end, he continues, "cannot be achieved without actions resembling moral actions proper, but the actions in question are intended by the philosopher as mere means toward his end" (*CM*, 27). In addition, the philosophic life "also calls for prudence, for the philosopher must deliberate about how he can secure the conditions for his philosophizing here and now" (*CM*, 27). Thus, the philosopher views politics and moral action in an instrumental fashion; he is compelled to take politics into account in order to achieve his ultimate end of philosophic contemplation. According to Strauss, while Aristotle certainly views the philosophic life as superior to the political life, he does not view it as being ultimately separate from the political life.

Of course, Strauss's understanding of Aristotle's political philosophy, according to which Aristotle believes the philosopher is compelled to concern himself with political affairs to secure his

ultimate end of theoretical contemplation, does not yet make his teaching similar to that of Machiavelli. According to Strauss, the modern philosophers treat theoretical science as an instrument to conquer nature and liberate man from his enslavement—a characterization that cannot be applied to Strauss's Aristotle. At first glance, it seems that Strauss includes Machiavelli among those modern philosophers, rendering Machiavelli's political philosophy fundamentally different from that of Aristotle. As noted, Strauss details how Machiavelli equates nature with Fortuna and how the "excellent man" is able to conquer Fortuna (and thereby nature) to attain glory. Further, in the concluding pages of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* Strauss seems to charge Machiavelli with implementing a fundamental change in the role of political philosophy:

> [Machiavelli] achieves the decisive turn toward that notion of philosophy according to which its purpose is to relieve man's estate or to increase man's power or to guide man toward the rational society, the bond and the end of which is enlightened self-interest or the comfortable self-preservation of each of its members. . . . By supplying all men with goods which they desire, by being the obvious benefactress of all men, philosophy (or science) ceases to be suspect or alien. (*TM*, 296)

Strauss seems adamant that the fundamental distinction between classical political philosophers and Machiavelli is that the latter *uses* political philosophy to make life better for mankind. The judgment that Machiavelli reduces the dignity of philosophy is repeated in his essay "Marsilius of Padua," where Strauss asserts that Machiavelli's "antitheological passion" induced him "to take the extreme step of questioning the supremacy of contemplation" (*LAM*, 201). Strauss indicates that Machiavelli reduces political philosophy to the role of a "humble and charitable handmaid" (*CM*, 42).

Yet, much of what Strauss writes in these concluding pages seems to be vastly at odds with the preceding pages of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Strauss had previously argued, for example, that as the

"teacher of the founders" of the city, Machiavelli "looks at society not theoretically but . . . in the perspective of founders" (*TM*, 288), which means that he looks at things from the perspective of prudence rather than philosophy. This indicates that Machiavelli's political philosophy does not reduce philosophy to the role of a "charitable handmaid" but rather sees the political realm as closed off from the theoretical realm, much as Aristotle's realm of prudence was closed off from the theoretical realm. This is not to say, however, that philosophy is unconcerned with politics. In fact, Strauss writes a mere four pages later that Machiavelli agrees with the ancients with regard to the following: "Philosophy consists in ascending from opinion to knowledge, and opinion is primarily political opinion, [therefore] philosophy is essentially related to the city; as transcending the city, it presupposes the city; philosophy must therefore be concerned with the city or be politically responsible" (*TM*, 292). For Strauss, both Machiavelli and the ancients believed that while philosophy ought not to be used to relieve man's estate, it nevertheless must concern itself with the political realm.

The idea that philosophy must be concerned with politics is reiterated in Strauss's discussion of Machiavelli's gravity and levity and in his depiction of Aristotle's thoughts on the first political philosopher, Hippodamus. Expounding on Machiavelli's depiction of the philosopher, Strauss writes:

> The excellence of a man who is the teacher of both princes and peoples, of the thinker who has discovered the modes and orders which are in accordance with nature, can be said to be the highest excellence of which man is capable. Yet this highest freedom cannot become effective if the thinker does not undergo what to him must be the most degrading of all servitudes. Or if, prompted by levity, he would derive enjoyment from undergoing that servitude, he would lose the respect of his fellow men. (*TM*, 244)

This passage is somewhat abstruse. However, once we understand that gravity concerns "knowledge of the truth," while levity "comes

into play in the communication of the truth," the meaning of the passage becomes clear (*TM*, 290). While the philosopher has discovered new modes and orders, such modes and orders will not become operative unless he humbles himself by disclosing his knowledge; unless he acts as a "charitable handmaid," his discovery will lie dormant.

This sentiment is echoed in *The City and Man*, in which Strauss discusses Aristotle's thoughts on Hippodamus. Aristotle, writes Strauss, depicts Hippodamus as living "from ambition, in a somewhat overdone manner" (*CM*, 18). The reason for Aristotle's "slightly malicious gossip," argues Strauss, is to show how the first political philosopher appeared as ridiculous to "sensible freemen"—when the philosopher turns to political things, he loses the "respect of his fellow men" (*CM*, 18). Aristotle's depiction of Hippodamus, Strauss states, is his way of expressing that "philosophy had to be compelled to become concerned with political things" (*CM*, 18). Thus, Strauss believes that while both philosophers saw the communication of philosophy to non-philosophers (or the application of philosophy to the political realm) as a task that pales in comparison to the activity of philosophy proper, they both considered it necessary.

This raises the question, What are we to make of Strauss's statement in the concluding pages of *Thoughts on Machiavelli* that "[Machiavelli] achieves the decisive turn toward that notion of philosophy according to which its purpose is to relieve man's estate or to increase man's power"? Is it not inconsistent with Strauss's earlier statements in the text? In fact, a close reading of this statement makes clear that no inconsistency exists. Strauss merely states that Machiavelli "achieves the decisive turn *toward*" a philosophy that is used to relieve man's estate, not that this is the purpose of Machiavelli's own philosophy (*TM*, 296, emphasis added). Similarly, he writes that "in [Machiavelli's] thought the meaning of philosophy is *undergoing* a change," not that it *has* undergone a change (*TM*, 295, emphasis added). Both of these qualified statements, combined with the previous text of the book, suggest that Strauss did not see Machiavelli as one of those anti-Aristotelian moderns

who view the purpose of philosophy to consist in relieving man's necessitous condition. Rather, they merely suggest that Machiavelli helped to further the advent of the anti-Aristotelian moderns.

That Strauss thinks both Machiavelli and Aristotle see the communication of philosophy to non-philosophers as an activity of secondary importance but nevertheless necessary indicates he believes that each thinker prioritizes the intellect over the body or that both prioritize the soul over man's corporeal existence. However, again in the concluding pages of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss provides an interpretation of Machiavelli's writings on the soul that calls into question Machiavelli's prioritization of the soul over the body and seems to be at odds with Machiavelli's preceding statements on the soul. Strauss writes that Machiavelli "is silent about the soul because he has forgotten the soul" (*TM*, 294). Yet, in the introductory chapter Strauss describes Machiavelli as "a patriot" who "is more concerned with the salvation of his fatherland than with the salvation of his soul" (*TM*, 10). Machiavelli's patriotism, he notes, "presupposes a comprehensive reflection regarding the status of the fatherland on the one hand and of the soul on the other," and this comprehensive reflection, Strauss says, "is the core of Machiavelli's thought" (10). It would, of course, be odd to say, on the basis of a "comprehensive reflection" on the soul, that Machiavelli "forgot" about the soul.

What are we to make of Strauss's statement that Machiavelli has "forgotten the soul" (*TM*, 295)? In full, Strauss's statement reads as follows: "[Machiavelli] is silent about the soul because he has forgotten the soul, *just as he has forgotten tragedy and Socrates*" (*TM*, 294, emphasis added). This qualified statement means that Strauss does not see Machiavelli as having forgotten the soul entirely, but only to the extent he has forgotten tragedy and Socrates. Three pages earlier Strauss writes:

> Machiavelli's claim that he has taken a road not yet trodden by anyone implies that in breaking with the Socratic tradition he did not return to an anti-Socratic tradition, although he could not help agreeing in numerous points with the

> Socratic tradition on the one hand and the anti-Socratic tradition on the other. (*TM*, 291)

Strauss makes clear in this passage that Machiavelli has not forgotten Socrates but instead agreed with Machiavelli on "numerous points." For example, Strauss writes, "As for the teachings like those which Plato put into the mouths of Thrasymachus and Callicles, it suffices here to say that those Platonic characters stop where both Socrates and Machiavelli begin; the originators of such teaching have not even grasped the essential connection between ruling and service" (*TM*, 292). Strauss tells us that Machiavelli, like Socrates, recognizes that "desire for glory" or private vice is a "passion which, if its scope is broadened, transforms the lover of tyranny, to say nothing of the lover of bodily pleasures, into a lover of justice" (*TM*, 289). Thus, while Machiavelli is silent about Socrates, it would be incorrect to say that he has forgotten about him.

The same holds true with regard to tragedy. Strauss writes, "There is no tragedy in Machiavelli because he has no sense of the sacredness of 'the common.' The fate of neither Cesare Borgia nor Manlius Capitolinus is tragic or understood by Machiavelli as tragic; they failed because they had chance or the times against them" (*TM*, 292). The *or* in the last sentence of the previous statement is significant. Strauss notes that Borgia and Capitolinus had "chance or the times against them." Strauss had earlier stated that Machiavelli saw chance, or Fortuna, as equivalent to prudence. Thus, Strauss seems to be suggesting that Borgia and Capitolinus either lacked prudence or had the times against them. Furthermore, Strauss immediately follows the statement on tragedy with the following: "As regards chance in general, it can be conquered; man is the master" (*TM*, 292). If the fates of Borgia and Capitolinus are not to be described as tragic, their fate would have to be considered solely the result of the "times against them." Indeed, if chance—which is capable of being conquered—is to blame for the fates of Borgia and Capitolinus, their fate would be attributable to their tragic inability to conquer chance.

When we turn to Strauss's depiction of Capitolinus's fate, we see a characterization of his failed conspiracy against his fatherland, which can best be described as tragic. Strauss writes:

> In his last statement Machiavelli finds the origin of Capitolinus' [abortive conspiracy against his fatherland] in his envy, which blinded his mind so far that he did not examine whether the available matter permitted the establishment of tyranny; his "evil nature," it appears, consisted in the excessive power of a passion which more than any other makes men operate well, for the root of envy proves to be love of glory; but his love of glory was stronger than his understanding: his evil nature consisted in his lack of understanding; he was "full of every virtue and had done publicly and privately very many laudable works," but he lacked that prudence which lets a man see that one must seek glory by different ways in a corrupt city than in a city which still leads a republican life. (*TM*, 272–73)

Strauss seems to go out of his way to represent Capitolinus as a hero with a tragic flaw, which leads to his downfall. His envy, which we are told is "a passion which arises with necessity in all men" and "makes men operate well," was simply too strong and impeded his ability to act prudently (*TM*, 272). Strauss seems purposefully to depict Capitolinus's fate as tragic to demonstrate that Machiavelli is, in fact, not silent with regard to tragedy.

Strauss does not see Machiavelli as silent about either Socrates or tragedy. Instead, he sees Machiavelli as agreeing with Socrates on "numerous points" and, as the example of Capitolinus makes clear, Strauss does not see Machiavelli as having forgotten tragedy. Thus, Strauss's contention that Machiavelli has "forgotten the soul, just as he has forgotten tragedy and Socrates," is, again, technically correct: Machiavelli has forgotten neither tragedy nor Socrates, and in like manner he has not forgotten the soul.

If Machiavelli has not forgotten the soul, then why did he choose to remain silent about the soul? Does Machiavelli's silence

about the soul reveal the "soulless character of his teaching" in a way that would serve to distinguish it from that of Aristotle? (*TM*, 295). According to Strauss, Machiavelli did not so much forget the soul, as he consciously chose to dispense with any discussion of the soul. Machiavelli's silence in this regard, he indicates, is therefore meaningful. Indeed, Strauss writes that Machiavelli's silence about the soul suggests "that he regards the question concerning the status of [the soul] or concerning [its] truth or [its] reality, as very important. He expresses his disapproval of common opinion [regarding the soul] most effectively by his silence" (*TM*, 31). Strauss asserts that Machiavelli viewed the status of the soul as important and that he considered the common opinion about the soul flawed.

Shortly after his observation that Machiavelli remained silent about the soul, Strauss turns to a seemingly unrelated matter: the importance Machiavelli placed on the freedom of thought. Machiavelli, he writes, not only assigns great value to "freedom of thought or of discussion" but also indicates "how rarely that freedom is to be found" (*TM*, 33). Strauss goes on to note that the freedom of thought was not available in Machiavelli's own time, and in support of this contention, he points to the figure of Pietro Pomponazzo, who encountered many difficulties because of his writings "on the immortality of the soul" (*TM*, 33).[16] Strauss seems to silently suggest that Machiavelli's own silence about the soul may have been attributable to fear of persecution. Of course, this does not obviate Strauss's conclusion that Machiavelli's "silence about the soul is a perfect expression of the soulless character of his teaching" (*TM*, 295). Indeed, it could be that Machiavelli was concerned that if he explicitly denied the existence of the soul (i.e., if his teaching was explicitly soulless), he might face persecution, or at least difficulties, in the same way as Pomponazzo.

Strauss's chapter entitled "Machiavelli's Teaching," however, does not bear out the interpretation according to which Machiavelli remained silent about the soul because he denied its existence. Strauss begins this chapter by distinguishing his own interpretation of Machiavelli from that of writers who mistakenly concluded that

Machiavelli was simply a pagan who "forgot or denied the other world" and was "enamored of the worldly glory of pagan Rome" (*TM*, 175). Nevertheless, Strauss states that "it is not misleading to count Machiavelli among 'the wise of the world'" (*TM*, 175). The wise of the world, we are told, are *falāsifa* or "Averroists," who, in addition to viewing the world as eternal—thereby denying that God is the efficient cause of the world—believe that "there is only one soul in all men" (*TM*, 175). Strauss indicates that Machiavelli forgot the soul not because he denied its existence but because his views on its manner of existence were heterodox.

In sum, while it is technically true that Machiavelli is silent with respect to the soul, this silence does not, according to Strauss, reveal a "soulless character" to Machiavelli's teaching that would enable one to distinguish it from that of Aristotle. Instead, Strauss views Machiavelli's silence as an ironic silence that conceals his own heterodox understanding of the soul.[17] According to Strauss, Machiavelli prioritized philosophy over politics, and thereby the soul over the body, in a manner consistent with the political thought of Aristotle.

Ancients and Moderns: On Guarded Teachings

Despite all the similarities that Strauss points out between Aristotle and Machiavelli, we might nevertheless conclude that he sees their political philosophies as being radically different from each other because of how each thinker chose to present his teaching. Near the beginning of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss writes that

> [w]hile [Machiavelli's] claim to radical innovation is suggested, it is made in a subdued manner: he suggests that he is merely stating in his own name and openly a teaching which some ancient writers had set forth covertly or by using their characters as their mouthpieces. Yet this strengthens Machiavelli's claim in truth as much as it weakens it in appearance: one cannot radically change the mode of a teaching without radically changing its substance. (*TM*, 59)

At first glance, Strauss's statement seems to suggest that however much congruity might exist between Machiavelli's teaching and that of the classical philosophers, Machiavelli's mode of presentation effects an alteration in the substantive content of that teaching. The footnote appended to this passage, which in part directs us to chapter 17 of *The Prince*, seems to support this interpretation. In chapter 17, Machiavelli writes, "It is impossible for the new prince to escape a name for cruelty because new states are full of dangers. And Virgil says in the mouth of Dido: 'The harshness of things and the newness of the kingdom compel me to contribute such things, and to keep a broad watch over the borders.'"[18] While Machiavelli saw no problem in openly stating harsh teachings, his predecessors, such as Virgil, believed these teachings ought to be expressed more guardedly. Strauss indicates that this change in method alters the substance of these teachings.

Immediately after the passage in which Strauss indicates that Machiavelli adopts an outspoken mode in comparison with the ancients, Strauss writes that "the argument ascends from chapter 15 [of *The Prince*] up to chapters 19 or 20 and then descends again" (*TM*, 59–60). This is an odd description of the tenor of these passages, as Machiavelli opens chapter 17 by saying, "Descending next to the other qualities cited before. . . ."[19] Strauss characterizes as an ascent what Machiavelli himself declares to be a descent. Strauss further notes that chapter 19 can be described as "the peak of the *Prince* as a whole," and that it "reveals the truth about the founders, or the greatest doers almost fully" (*TM*, 60). In contrast, Machiavelli again treats chapter 19 as part of the descent.[20]

How does chapter 19 proceed, and what are we to make of the fact that Strauss describes it as the peak of an ascent? In chapter 19, Machiavelli provides the example of the emperors "from Marcus the philosopher to Maximinus" to illustrate his teaching that princes ought to avoid offending the people.[21] Machiavelli discusses the reign of these Roman emperors, and he pays particular attention to Marcus the philosopher and Severus as exemplars or characters a prince ought to imitate.[22] We might say that Machiavelli uses these emperors as his mouthpiece. That Strauss asserts

chapter 19 to be the peak of Machiavelli's teaching, despite Machiavelli's own description of this chapter as forming part of a decline, indicates that he views Machiavelli as exercising a certain reserve and that Machiavelli, much like the political philosophers of the classical age, uses characters as his mouthpiece.[23] Therefore, it is neither correct to say that Machiavelli fails to make use of mouthpieces in presenting his teaching nor correct to say that he proclaims his teaching without the classical philosophers' characteristic reserve. Instead, Strauss makes the point that if Machiavelli effected a radical change in political philosophy, such a change was not made on the basis of Machiavelli's mode of presentation.

Conclusion: Strauss's Intention and the Malignancy of the Times

On close investigation, the many differences Strauss observes between the thought of Machiavelli and that of Aristotle disappear. Strauss shows that Aristotle and Machiavelli have similar understandings of cosmology, political philosophy, and ethics, and he shows that the way they present their teaching is similar as well. What is Strauss's purpose in presenting the writings of these two thinkers in this way? Why does he seek to distinguish the political philosophies of Aristotle and Machiavelli so sharply when he does not himself appear to believe the two differ that fundamentally? In "Persecution and the Art of Writing," Strauss makes the case that persecution conducted by a society's authorities "gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing . . . in which the truth about all crucial things is presented [by independent thinkers] exclusively between the lines" (*PAW*, 491). Strauss suggests that these independent thinkers will present their teachings esoterically so that only "intelligent readers" will be able to grasp the meaning of the author's message (*PAW*, 491).

Strauss's observations have a certain plausibility as applied to illiberal, premodern societies, and scholars have done impressive work in verifying esoteric writing in the history of political thought.[24] In addition, many scholars have made the case that Strauss himself writes in an esoteric fashion. Indeed, this article has made the case that Strauss's writings on Aristotle and Machiavelli

appear to employ many esoteric artifices. However, we might be left wondering why Strauss, writing in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century, should feel the need to employ this type of writing. It seems unlikely that Strauss would fear persecution in such a liberal society. Strauss provides some indication in another article dealing with esoteric writing. He explains that esoteric writing is necessary in *all* societies because of the relationship between philosophy and society:

> Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about "all things" by knowledge of "all things"; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society." (*WIPP*, 221)

Because philosophy dissolves the opinions by which society conducts itself, philosophers choose to proceed in an esoteric fashion. Elsewhere, Strauss writes that "every political society that ever has been or ever will be rests on a particular fundamental opinion which cannot be replaced by knowledge" (*LAM*, viii). Even a liberal society that values freedom of thought operates within a horizon of opinion, and philosophy by its nature operates as a solvent upon that opinion. For Strauss, it is not simply out of fear of persecution that an author might choose to engage in esoteric writing; it is also out of a desire to protect society. We might conclude that in his presentation of the history of political philosophy, Strauss saw himself as preserving the liberal character of society while granting himself, and his intelligent readers, the opportunity and space to read and interpret the tradition.

Even granting, however, that Strauss saw esoteric writing as necessary in liberal societies for the sake of their preservation and that he employed such a method of writing, we might remain perplexed as to what role these observations play in Strauss's interpretation of Aristotle and Machiavelli. Why might a liberal society require a distension of the gap between the thought of Aristotle

and that of Machiavelli? We are given some indication as to Strauss's intentions in his discussion of one purpose of Machiavelli's ruthless methods:

> The ruthless counsels given throughout the *Prince* are addressed less to princes, who would hardly need them, than to "the young" who are concerned with understanding the nature of society. Those true addressees of the *Prince* have been brought up in teachings which, in the light of Machiavelli's wholly new teaching, reveal themselves to be much too confident of human goodness, if not of the goodness of creation, and hence too gentle or effeminate. Just as a man who is timorous by training or nature cannot acquire courage, which is the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness, unless he drags himself in the direction of foolhardiness, so Machiavelli's pupils must go through a process of brutalization in order to be freed from effeminacy. (*TM*, 81–82)

According to Strauss, Machiavelli saw the fashionable teaching of his time as having contributed to a sort of effeminacy, which ruthless training had to root out. In the same way that "one learns bayoneting by using weapons which are much heavier than those used in actual combat" (*TM*, 82), Machiavelli had to teach the young to free them from their effeminacy. The teachers of the fashionable teaching of Machiavelli's times were, of course, Aristotelians of a certain type. Thus, as Strauss views it, Machiavelli's new modes and orders were designed to give the young an education that might shed their effeminacy brought about by this type of Aristotelianism.

Considering Strauss's obfuscation of the shocking points of congruence he saw between the political thought of Aristotle and Machiavelli, we may conclude that he wrote the way he did to protect society from the danger a certain type of Aristotelianism shorn of its effeminacy might pose. Should this tradition of Aristotelianism learn the art of bayoneting with Machiavelli's

heavier weapons, the results might be decidedly illiberal, thereby endangering the liberal character of society. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that Strauss prefers the "old-fashioned and simple opinion according to which Machiavelli was a teacher of evil" and has no relation to the philosophy of Aristotle (*TM*, 9). To preserve the liberal and apparently moderate character of society while simultaneously guaranteeing the intellectual minority of independent thinkers the ability to engage in free thought, Strauss communicates his teaching concerning the striking similarity between the political philosophies of Aristotle and Machiavelli in an esoteric manner.

Given the bloody consequences of the twentieth century's encounter with various systems of illiberal thought, Strauss's project makes a great deal of sense, and his desire to place the heavier bayonets out of reach for a period is to be commended. As Strauss himself recognized, however, the authorities and fashionable teachings of the times change, and with the change in authority come new malignancies.[25] The dangers confronting liberal society in the twenty-first century no longer come from an illiberal tradition that is overly familiar with Machiavelli's heavy bayonets but arise instead from a liberalism that has become incapable of lifting even an ordinary bayonet. It has long been recognized that to sustain itself and maintain its youthful vigor, liberalism requires certain strands of opposition to its own hegemony, whether in the form of religion, civic associations, or illiberal thought, to provide the necessary ground on which liberalism can stand. In the present age, it may be beneficial to reveal the similarities Strauss sees between Aristotle and Machiavelli to provide a certain Aristotelian tradition training with heavier bayonets, such that it may provide the necessary counterforces that prevent liberal society from collapsing in on itself.[26]

In sum, though on the surface Strauss presents the philosophy of Machiavelli as very different from that of Aristotle, a close reading reveals that he saw the political philosophies of the two thinkers as congruous with each other on several points. He sees both thinkers not only as positing what appears to be a mechanistic cosmology

but also as advocating similar ethical responses to that cosmology. In addition, according to Strauss, both thinkers were concerned with man's soul, and they viewed it as somewhat humbling but necessary that philosophy concern itself with political things. Finally, Strauss indicates that Machiavelli and Aristotle presented their teachings in a similar manner. When we place these observations in light of Strauss's writings on the purpose of esoteric writing, we may tentatively conclude that Strauss himself presented his thoughts on Aristotle and Machiavelli esoterically to preserve the liberal character of society.

Notes

1. Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), 117.
2. Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 184.
3. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1950), 177. This identification of Machiavelli as a "greater Columbus" is repeated throughout Strauss's writings. See, e.g., *What Is Political Philosophy* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), 40; *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), 85. All further citations to Strauss's work will occur in-text with the following abbreviations: *Natural Right and History* (*NRH*); *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (*TM*); *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) (*CM*); *What Is Political Philosophy* (New York: Free Press, 1959) (WIPP); *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) (*LAM*); "Persecution and the Art of Writing," *Social Research* 8, no. 1 (2000): 488–504 (*PAW*).
4. Willmoore Kendall, "Thoughts on Machiavelli by Leo Strauss," *Philosophical Review* 75, no. 2 (1996): 251.
5. The notion of ascent is significant. Just as Strauss interpreted other people's works as having multiple levels of meaning, it is likely that Strauss himself wrote his own works in such a manner. See, Leo Strauss, *WIPP*, 230: "one writes as one reads."
6. Steven J. Lenzner, "Strauss's Three Burkes: The Problem of Edmund Burke in *Natural Right and History*," *Political Theory* 19 no. 3 (1991): 377.
7. The extent to which Strauss saw Machiavelli's abandonment of the teleological understanding of nature as a departure from Aristotelian

cosmology is touched on briefly in *WIPP*. Strauss writes, "The theoretical or cosmological basis of [Machiavelli's] political teaching was a kind of decayed Aristotelianism. This means that he assumed, but did not demonstrate, the untenable character of teleological natural science." *WIPP*, 47. Strauss does not clarify whether it was Machiavelli's belief in the "untenable character of teleological natural science" or Machiavelli's failure to demonstrate its untenability that renders his cosmological basis to be specifically *decayed* Aristotelianism.

8. Aristotle, "Physics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye (New York: Random House, 1941), 196a25ff.
9. Michael Zuckert and Catherine Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 161.
10. Strauss writes that for Machiavelli "the necessities, with a view to which men of supreme prudence as such necessarily act, are not so much present as foreseen necessities" (*TM*, 251).
11. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a2–6. All references to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are to the Bartlett and Collins translation. Aristotle, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) (hereafter cited as *NE*).
12. Aristotle writes of the perfectly happy life that "a life of this sort would exceed what is human" (*NE*, 1777b28; cf. *NE*, 1154b 24–28).
13. Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 183–84.
14. Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 184.
15. Whether Strauss is correct in drawing an equivalence between the morality of Machiavelli and that of Aristotle is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the matter seems settled on the basis of Aristotle's condemnation of adultery and homosexuality as actions that are base and therefore always wrong (*NE*, 1107a11–17, 1148b29–31), which seems far removed from Machiavelli's teaching in the *Mandragola* concerning the possible advantages of adultery and his seemingly comic treatment of homosexuality in his poetry (See, e.g., "By the Snake Charmers," in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 881–82. This distinction is not vitiated solely on the basis of Machiavelli's advice in chapter 17 of *The Prince*, according to which a prince ought to abstain from taking the property and women of his people, as Machiavelli's advice is given on the basis of practical considerations. Cf. Aristotle's *Politics*, 1315a14–19 and 1269b24–34.

16. Pietro Pomponazzo was a Catholic philosopher who wrote on Aristotle's conception of the soul. Specifically, Pomponazzo wrote that Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's conception of the soul was incorrect and that Averroes's interpretation was "without fail the opinion of Aristotle." Craig Martin, *Subverting Aristotle: Religion, History, and Philosophy in Early Modern Science* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 62–63. It may be that Strauss saw Machiavelli as having had an opinion similar to Pomponazzo's.
17. Strauss writes, "Through an irony beyond Machiavelli's irony, his silence about the soul is a perfect expression of the soulless character of his teaching" (*TM*, 294). This abstruse passage could be interpreted to mean that Strauss's own presentation, according to which Machiavelli's teaching is soulless, is ironic.
18. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 66.
19. *The Prince*, 65.
20. Machiavelli writes, "But because I have spoken of the most important qualities mentioned above, I want to discourse briefly on the others." *The Prince*, 71.
21. *The Prince*, 75.
22. *The Prince*, 82. Precisely what Strauss views the esoteric teaching of Machiavelli to consist in is beyond the scope of this article. However, it appears to me that this teaching is related to Marcus the philosopher's status as a "hereditary prince" and the "ancient order" described in chapter 19. *The Prince*, 77, 82.
23. Strauss's belief that Machiavelli wrote in a reserved manner is echoed in the "Preface to the American Edition" of his book *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, trans. Elsa Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). In correcting his mistake of identifying Hobbes as opposed to Machiavelli as the originator of modern political philosophy, Strauss writes, "I did not consider the possibility that Machiavelli still exercised a kind of reserve which Hobbes disdained to exercise" (xvi). Given this description, we might conclude that Strauss sees Hobbes as inheriting from Machiavelli the conditions that enabled him to be outspoken.
24. See Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
25. See *NRH*, 39 (asserting that the basic problems studied by social science "change with the change of the social and cultural situation"). If the malignancies of the times change, then we may conclude that not all

careful readers who choose to reveal the meaning of a particular text are denouncing the author to the authorities. Strauss did not fear the danger of a reader "who, after having found the author out, would denounce him to the authorities," as he believed there to be some truth in the Socratic dictum "virtue is knowledge." *PAW*, 491–92. If the knowledge referred to in the Socratic dictum includes prudence, we may conclude that Strauss charitably left the prudential judgment concerning the appropriate time to reveal the meaning of his teaching to the discretion of his careful readers.

26. Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 275–88; John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Kathy Casey (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), 36–37. For an alternative reason why it may be necessary to reveal the many similarities Strauss sees between the political philosophies of Aristotle and Machiavelli, see Virgil, *Aeneid* I, 563–64.