

Research Article

Niccolò Machiavelli's Political Theory: Acquiring Political Power through *Virtù*

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Abstract: This article examines Niccolò Machiavelli's political theory with a focus on the acquisition and consolidation of power through the concept of *virtù*. Situated in the context of Renaissance Italy's political fragmentation, foreign invasions, and competing city-states, Machiavelli's work reflects a pragmatic response to instability and the challenges of governance. The study explores how *virtù*, understood as a combination of skill, decisiveness, adaptability, and strategic intelligence, enables rulers to achieve and maintain authority in new and hereditary principalities. The relationship between *virtù* and *fortuna* is analyzed to show how effective rulers mitigate the effects of fortune through preparation, foresight, and timely action. The article also investigates the ethical implications of Machiavelli's theory, including the separation of politics from morality and the justification of morally ambiguous actions for the sake of political stability. Debates surrounding Machiavelli's endorsement of tyranny versus realism are considered, highlighting his emphasis on the outcomes of political action rather than adherence to conventional moral norms. Historical examples, such as Cesare Borgia and other founders and conquerors, illustrate the practical application of *virtù* in achieving political success. Finally, the study situates Machiavelli in the broader discourse of political realism and leadership theory, emphasizing the contemporary relevance of his insights for understanding power, strategy, and ethical decision-making in governance. By synthesizing historical analysis, theoretical interpretation, and practical application, the article demonstrates that Machiavelli's political theory remains a foundational framework for comprehending the complexities of acquiring and sustaining political authority through skillful and adaptable leadership.

Keywords: Niccolò Machiavelli; *virtù*; *fortuna*; political power

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1. Introduction

The political thought of Niccolò Machiavelli must be understood within the turbulent socio-political context of Renaissance Italy, a period characterized by fragmentation, shifting alliances, and recurrent foreign interventions. The Italian peninsula of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was divided into competing city-states, whose instability exposed them to domination by powerful monarchies such as France and Spain. Machiavelli's diplomatic service in the Florentine Republic, as well as his subsequent exile following the Medici restoration, provided him with direct insight into the mechanisms of political power, the fragility of states, and the decisive role of leadership in times of crisis (Machiavelli, 2014a; Skinner, 2019). These experiences informed his departure from idealized political models and led to the development of a distinctly realist approach to governance. As scholars have noted, Machiavelli's work represents a crucial turning point in political thought, marking the transition from medieval moral philosophy to a modern, secular, and empirical analysis of politics (Cassirer, 1946; Pocock, 1975; Viroli, 1998).

Within this intellectual framework, *The Prince* occupies a foundational position in the canon of political philosophy. Unlike earlier treatises that emphasized the moral obligations of rulers, Machiavelli's text is primarily concerned with the practical acquisition and preservation of political authority. The work challenges the long-standing tradition of aligning political legitimacy with ethical virtue, instead proposing that effective rulership often requires actions that would be considered morally questionable in other contexts (Russell, 2005;

Mansfield, 1996). This analytical shift has led many scholars to interpret *The Prince* as the origin of political realism, a tradition that prioritizes power, necessity, and state survival over normative ethical considerations (Strauss, 1958; Boñol, 2026). At the same time, contemporary scholarship continues to debate whether Machiavelli's arguments should be read as descriptive, prescriptive, or even ironic, thereby underscoring the enduring complexity and relevance of his thought (Najemy, 1996; McCormick, 2001).

Central to Machiavelli's political theory is the concept of *virtù*, a term that resists straightforward translation and cannot be equated with conventional moral virtue. Rather than denoting ethical goodness, *virtù* signifies a constellation of qualities that enable a ruler to act decisively and effectively in the pursuit of political power. These qualities include strategic foresight, courage, adaptability, and the willingness to employ force, deception, or calculated cruelty when necessary (Machiavelli, 2014b; Mansfield, 1996). As such, *virtù* reflects an active capacity to shape political circumstances, in contrast to passively submitting to them. Modern interpretations emphasize that *virtù* must be understood in relation to the unpredictable nature of political life, where success depends on the ability to respond flexibly to changing conditions (Skinner, 2019; Viroli, 1998). This redefinition of virtue represents a radical break from both classical and Christian moral traditions, in which ethical conduct was regarded as the foundation of legitimate rule.

Furthermore, Machiavelli's conceptualization of *virtù* is closely linked to his understanding of *fortuna*, the element of chance or contingency that influences human affairs. While *fortuna* introduces uncertainty and potential instability, *virtù* provides the means by which a ruler can confront, manage, and even overcome these external forces (Pocock, 1975; Russell, 2005). The dynamic interplay between *virtù* and *fortuna* highlights Machiavelli's broader commitment to a realistic appraisal of political life, where outcomes are neither wholly determined by fate nor entirely subject to human control. Instead, effective leadership emerges from the capacity to navigate this tension through strategic action and prudent judgment.

This study argues that Machiavelli presents *virtù* as a pragmatic and indispensable quality for both acquiring and maintaining political power. By privileging effectiveness over moral idealism, his theory underscores the necessity of adaptability, strength, and calculated action in the exercise of political authority. In doing so, Machiavelli challenges traditional ethical frameworks and redefines the criteria of successful leadership. Contemporary scholarship continues to engage with these issues, particularly in light of ongoing debates about the relationship between ethics and politics, the role of leadership in times of crisis, and the persistence of realist approaches in modern political theory (McCormick, 2001; Sleat, 2014). Consequently, an examination of *virtù* not only illuminates the foundations of Machiavelli's political thought but also contributes to broader discussions about the nature of power and governance in both historical and contemporary contexts.

2. Historical and Intellectual Context

The development of Niccolò Machiavelli's political theory is inseparable from the fragmented political landscape of Renaissance Italy. During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Italian peninsula was divided into numerous rival city-states, including Florence, Venice, Milan, and the Papal States, each pursuing its own political and military ambitions. This internal division rendered Italy vulnerable to repeated foreign invasions, most notably by France and Spain, whose interventions exacerbated instability and undermined local sovereignty (Feaver, 1984; Skinner, 2019). The absence of a unified national authority, combined with constant shifts in alliances and power struggles, created a volatile environment in which political survival depended less on legitimacy or moral authority and more on strategic calculation and military strength (Pocock, 1975; Najemy, 1996). It was within this context of insecurity and competition that Machiavelli formulated his analysis of power, emphasizing the necessity of effective leadership capable of responding to rapidly changing circumstances.

Machiavelli's own career as a diplomat and civil servant in the Florentine Republic profoundly shaped his understanding of political practice. Serving in the chancery from 1498 to 1512, he was entrusted with numerous diplomatic missions to prominent political figures, including Cesare Borgia and the French court. These experiences provided him with firsthand exposure to the exercise of power, the strategies employed by rulers, and the role of military force in securing political authority (Machiavelli, 2014b; Viroli, 1998). His observations of Cesare Borgia, in particular, left a lasting impression, as Machiavelli regarded him as a model

of political effectiveness, capable of combining decisiveness with calculated cruelty when necessary (Mansfield, 1996). However, the restoration of Medici rule in Florence in 1512 led to Machiavelli's dismissal, imprisonment, and eventual exile. This period of political marginalization proved intellectually productive, as it prompted him to reflect systematically on the principles of governance and to compose *The Prince* as a means of articulating his political insights (Skinner, 2019; Strauss, 1958).

In addition to his contemporary experiences, Machiavelli's thought was deeply influenced by the legacy of classical antiquity, particularly the political and military history of ancient Rome. Drawing on historians such as Livy and Tacitus, he identified in Roman leaders examples of decisive action, civic virtue, and institutional strength that contributed to the durability of the Roman Republic (Pocock, 1975; Viroli, 1998). Unlike medieval thinkers who often subordinated politics to theological concerns, Machiavelli approached classical sources as practical guides to political success. Roman figures were admired not for their moral purity but for their capacity to achieve and sustain power under challenging conditions. This classical orientation is especially evident in his emphasis on the importance of military organization, civic discipline, and the active role of leadership in shaping political outcomes (Najemy, 1996). Through this engagement with antiquity, Machiavelli contributed to the broader Renaissance humanist project of recovering and reinterpreting classical knowledge in light of contemporary concerns.

The convergence of these historical and intellectual influences facilitated a significant shift from medieval moral conceptions of politics to a distinctly Renaissance form of political realism. Medieval political thought, shaped largely by Christian theology, tended to emphasize the ethical responsibilities of rulers and the alignment of political authority with divine law (Gilson, 1955). In contrast, Machiavelli advanced a secular and pragmatic approach that treated politics as an autonomous sphere governed by its own principles. Rather than prescribing how rulers ought to behave according to moral ideals, he sought to explain how they actually acquire, exercise, and maintain power in practice (Russell, 2005; Skinner, 2019). This methodological shift entailed a redefinition of key political concepts, including virtue, necessity, and legitimacy, in terms of their effectiveness rather than their conformity to moral norms.

Consequently, Machiavelli's political theory represents a foundational moment in the emergence of modern political realism. By grounding his analysis in the empirical realities of Renaissance Italy, his diplomatic experience, and the lessons of classical antiquity, he challenged the dominance of moralistic frameworks and introduced a new mode of political inquiry. As contemporary scholars have argued, this transformation continues to shape debates in political philosophy, particularly regarding the relationship between ethics and power, the role of leadership, and the conditions of political stability (McCormick, 2001; Sleat, 2014). In this respect, Machiavelli's work remains not only historically significant but also intellectually relevant for understanding the enduring dynamics of political life.

3. The Concept of *Virtù*

In Machiavelli's political philosophy, *virtù* represents a foundational quality that enables a ruler to acquire and maintain political power. Unlike the conventional understanding of virtue, which is often associated with moral goodness or ethical conduct, *virtù* is primarily concerned with effectiveness, skill, and the capacity to act decisively in pursuit of political objectives (Machiavelli, 2014a; Wood, 1967). It encompasses both personal talent and strategic insight, manifesting in behaviors that are most critical under conditions of political conflict or "battlefield" circumstances, where the stability of the state and the survival of the ruler are at stake (Mansfield, 1996; Viroli, 1998). Machiavelli emphasizes that the attainment of power depends not only on fortune (*fortuna*) but on the application of one's abilities, stating that ascending to princely authority requires "either ability or fortune" (Machiavelli, 2014a, p. 25). In this sense, *virtù* constitutes the proactive, skillful, and often daring engagement with political reality.

The distinction between *virtù* and Christian morality is central to understanding Machiavelli's innovation in political thought. Within the Christian tradition, virtue is largely defined as adherence to ethical norms and the performance of morally good actions (Gilson, 1955; Nederman, 2005). By contrast, Machiavelli's *virtù* is pragmatic and instrumental: it is judged by the ruler's capacity to secure and preserve power, rather than by conformity to moral ideals (Russell, 2005). Consequently, a prince may be "good" or "evil" depending on what circumstances demand; moral considerations are subordinate to political necessity

(Nederman, 2005; Sullivan, 2024). This distinction underscores Machiavelli's broader realist orientation, which treats politics as a domain governed by its own logic rather than by prescriptive ethical codes.

The core elements of *virtù* encompass qualities that collectively enable effective governance. First, courage and decisiveness are essential: a ruler must act boldly to seize opportunities, confront adversaries, and respond to crises without hesitation (Machiavelli, 1935; Pocock, 1975). Strategic thinking is equally crucial, as it allows the ruler to anticipate challenges, manipulate circumstances, and make calculated decisions that enhance political security (Skinner, 2019; McCormick, 2001). Adaptability, or the capacity to respond flexibly to unforeseen events, ensures that the prince can navigate the unpredictable dynamics of power and manage the interplay between human agency and fortune (Machiavelli, 2014a; Sleat, 2014). Finally, Machiavelli recognizes that ruthlessness may be necessary: a prince must be willing to employ force, cunning, or coercion to preserve the state and deter internal and external threats (Mansfield, 1996; Abellanos, 2019). These elements collectively form a behavioral pattern through which a ruler transforms personal ability into political authority.

Historical exemplars illustrate the application of *virtù* as the foundation of political success. Leaders such as Sun Tzu in ancient China demonstrated how strategic skill and decisiveness could secure authority and extend influence (Tzu, 1988). In the Western tradition, Machiavelli frequently cites figures like Cesare Borgia as embodiments of *virtù*, whose combination of intelligence, adaptability, and ruthlessness enabled them to consolidate power and achieve political objectives (Mansfield, 1996; Viroli, 1998). By contrast, rulers who rely primarily on fortune are inherently vulnerable, as their authority depends on circumstances beyond their control and the goodwill of others (Machiavelli, 2014a; Nederman, 2005). Thus, *virtù* is not merely a personal attribute but the foundation of durable political power, enabling the prince to act with independence and enforce authority in a manner that secures both obedience and legitimacy (Abellanos, 2019; Sullivan, 2024).

In sum, Machiavelli's conception of *virtù* redefines the criteria for effective leadership by prioritizing skill, adaptability, and decisiveness over conventional moral norms. It is both a personal capacity and a strategic resource that allows a ruler to navigate the uncertainties of political life, confront challenges posed by fortune, and consolidate authority in the state. By highlighting these dimensions, Machiavelli offers a framework for understanding political power that remains relevant in both historical analysis and contemporary political theory (Skinner, 2019; Sleat, 2014).

4. *Virtù* and the Acquisition of Power

Political power, understood as the capacity to direct the behavior of people through laws, regulations, and coercive force, forms the foundation of Machiavelli's political theory (Collinge, 1999; Harris, 1957). While Machiavelli does not explicitly define political power, he emphasizes the strategies and qualities necessary for its acquisition and maintenance. According to his perspective, a ruler endowed with authority is positioned to act decisively, unconstrained by conventional moral boundaries, to secure the state and consolidate power (Abulad, 2009; Deitz, 1986). Central to this endeavor is the concept of *virtù*, which equips the prince with the skills, decisiveness, and strategic insight required to navigate the uncertainties of political life (Machiavelli, 2014a; Mansfield, 1996).

Machiavelli distinguishes between two primary types of principalities: hereditary and new. Hereditary principalities, typically inherited within established dynasties, benefit from continuity, existing institutions, and a populace accustomed to the ruling family, which reduces the need for extraordinary political maneuvering (Skinner, 2019; Viroli, 1998). In contrast, new principalities present far greater challenges, as the ruler must secure authority over unfamiliar populations and overcome resistance from entrenched political structures. In these contexts, *virtù* becomes indispensable: it enables the prince to assert control, exploit opportunities, and implement effective governance despite potential instability (Pocock, 1975; McCormick, 2001). Success in acquiring a new state depends less on inherited legitimacy and more on the ruler's ability to act strategically, decisively, and with calculated initiative.

Military strength and leadership constitute essential instruments for exercising *virtù* in the acquisition of power. Machiavelli consistently emphasizes that armed forces loyal to the prince, rather than mercenaries or auxiliary troops, are critical for maintaining authority and defending the state (Machiavelli, 2014a; Mansfield, 1996). Competent military leadership demonstrates both courage and strategic acumen, ensuring that the ruler can respond effectively to internal rebellion or external aggression. The effective deployment of force,

however, is not merely a matter of brute strength; it is intertwined with the prince's political judgment, enabling him to anticipate threats, exploit weaknesses, and solidify loyalty among subjects and allies (Skinner, 2019; Sleat, 2014).

Machiavelli also advocates the use of calculated cruelty and deception as tools for securing political power. The prince may need to employ coercion, manipulate public perception, or act in morally ambiguous ways to neutralize opposition and reinforce authority (Nederman, 2005; Abellanosa, 2019). Such actions, while often deemed unethical by conventional standards, are justified within Machiavelli's framework because they serve the greater purpose of maintaining the stability and longevity of the state. By integrating ruthlessness with strategic foresight, the ruler converts individual capacity – *virtù* – into tangible political control (Machiavelli, 2014a; Deitz, 1986).

Historical exemplars illustrate the practical application of *virtù* in acquiring and consolidating power. Cesare Borgia, often cited by Machiavelli, exemplifies a ruler whose combination of strategic intelligence, decisiveness, and opportunistic ruthlessness allowed him to unify territories and establish dominance in central Italy (Mansfield, 1996; Viroli, 1998). Likewise, founders and conquerors throughout history demonstrate that exceptional leaders leverage personal ability, strategic acumen, and military competence to acquire authority and sustain political control (Pocock, 1975; Skinner, 2019; Tzu, 1988). In each case, it is not mere fortune but the calculated exercise of *virtù* that determines the durability and effectiveness of political power.

In sum, Machiavelli's analysis of the acquisition of power underscores the centrality of *virtù* in navigating the complexities of governance. Through strategic action, military leadership, and, when necessary, the calculated use of cruelty and deception, a prince transforms personal skill into political authority, particularly in new principalities where inherited legitimacy is absent. By emphasizing these qualities, Machiavelli provides a blueprint for rulers seeking not only to attain power but to consolidate and maintain it in the often unpredictable sphere of political life (Abellanosa, 2019; Machiavelli, 2014a).

5. *Virtù* versus *Fortuna*

In Machiavelli's political theory, *fortuna* denotes the external forces, chance events, and unpredictable circumstances that shape human affairs. Unlike the common understanding of luck as mere randomness, Machiavelli presents *fortuna* as a powerful determinant of political outcomes, capable of influencing the course of events and constraining the actions of even the most capable rulers (Machiavelli, 2014a; Wooton, 1994). He compares *fortuna* to a raging river, capable of sweeping away everything in its path unless adequately managed (Machiavelli, 1935). In this sense, fortune represents the contingent and often uncontrollable aspects of political life, including shifts in public opinion, military reversals, and the emergence of unforeseen threats. Scholars have emphasized that *fortuna* functions as both an obstacle and a testing ground for rulers, shaping their capacity to act decisively and strategically (Donskis, 2011; Borja, 2016).

The relationship between *virtù* and *fortuna* is central to Machiavelli's conception of effective leadership. While fortune governs approximately half of human affairs, Machiavelli argues that the remainder falls under the ruler's agency, mediated through *virtù*—the skill, decisiveness, and adaptability that enables a prince to act prudently in the face of uncertainty (Machiavelli, 1935; Skinner, 2019). A prince who relies solely on *fortuna* is vulnerable, as his authority depends on conditions beyond his control; by contrast, a ruler who cultivates *virtù* can anticipate, mitigate, and even exploit the effects of fortune (Machiavelli, 2014a; Sleat, 2014). In this framework, *virtù* does not eliminate *fortuna* but operates in dialectical engagement with it: the ruler's effectiveness is measured by his capacity to respond to changing circumstances, making strategic decisions that align with the contingencies of the time (Machiavelli, 1996; Borja, 2016).

Machiavelli employs vivid metaphors to convey the dynamic interplay between *virtù* and *fortuna*. He likens fortune to a river whose seasonal floods can devastate the unprepared, suggesting that prudent measures can channel its force and prevent destruction (Machiavelli, 2014a). Similarly, in his famous analogy of fortune as a woman, he emphasizes the necessity of assertive and flexible action: fortune favors those who are bold, adaptable, and capable of seizing opportunities (Machiavelli, 2014a; Mansfield, 1996). These metaphors underscore the idea that political success is not a product of chance alone, but of skillful preparation, foresight, and timely action.

A central implication of this conceptualization is the balance between preparation and

opportunity. The prince must anticipate potential threats and align his actions with the demands of the moment, combining *virtù* with the situational awareness necessary to exploit favorable circumstances (Machiavelli, 2014a; McCormick, 2001). For instance, military preparedness, the consolidation of internal loyalty, and strategic diplomacy all serve as instruments through which *virtù* mitigates the influence of *fortuna* (Allen, 1928; Skinner, 2019). Machiavelli stresses that the successful prince is one who adapts to the “spirit of the times” and shapes his strategies to match evolving political realities (Machiavelli, 2014a, p. 29; Demeterio, 2007).

Moreover, Machiavelli emphasizes that while moral or ethical conduct may guide the prince in ordinary circumstances, it must never hinder his ability to act decisively when fortune threatens the state. The judicious application of *virtù* allows the ruler to enact policies and measures that safeguard political authority, even when these measures require morally ambiguous actions (Nederman, 2005; Abellanosa, 2019). In the *Discourses on Livy*, he further notes that although fortune cannot be entirely subdued, experience and prudent action enable human beings to anticipate its effects and reduce its disruptive power over human affairs (Machiavelli, 1996; Borja, 2016).

In Machiavelli’s analysis, the interplay of *virtù* and *fortuna* defines the challenges and possibilities of political leadership. While fortune represents the unpredictable and uncontrollable forces that shape events, *virtù* equips the prince with the skills, foresight, and adaptability necessary to respond effectively. Through strategic preparation, decisive action, and alignment with the contingencies of the times, the ruler can mitigate the risks posed by *fortuna*, transforming external constraints into opportunities for consolidating power. Consequently, Machiavelli’s framework presents political authority as a dynamic negotiation between human agency and chance, highlighting the enduring relevance of his insights for understanding the conditions of successful governance.

6. Strategies for Attaining Authority in Machiavellian Thought

6.1. *Acquiring Political Power through Hereditary*

In ruling a state, a monarchical type of government is one of the options. Monarchies may be hereditary, if the family has governed the state for generations. Monarchy or one in which the supreme and final authority is in the hands of a single person without regard to the source of his election or the nature of duration of his tenure (De Leon, 2005).

Similar to China, there exist political dynasties in which power is passed on to the ruler’s heir. An example is the Zhou dynasty. When King Wu died only a few years later, the heir to the throne, Prince Cheng, was still a minor and the Duke of Zhou stepped in as regent and effectively ruled until Prince Cheng could assume his role as monarch (Watson, 1966). Consequently, monarchy represents a phase in the attainment of political authority.

According to Niccolò Machiavelli, “Principalities are either hereditary, in which the family has been long established; or they are new” (Machiavelli, 2014a). The heir to the throne is required to follow the traditions set down by his predecessors. In this manner, the state’s citizens won’t have to get used to the new leader. Because it’s enough to follow his forefathers’ traditions and handle situations as they come up sensibly. Therefore, in order to overthrow the new king, the populace would not turn to violence. In some way the people would keep things the way they were used to. It happens that the hereditary prince will be more adored because he has less reason and need to offend.

The hereditary prince is anticipated to emulate his forebears’ governance style. If the hereditary prince enacts laws that diverge from those of his predecessors, the populace will depose him. If it happens that the successor does not resume the virtue of his ancestor, the kingdom will come into ruin (Machiavelli, 1996, p. 52).

6.2. *Political Power through Arms of Others or by Good Fortune*

In chapter VII of Niccolò Machiavelli’s book, he said that,

“Those who rise from private citizens to be princes by fortune have little trouble in rising but very much in maintaining their position. They meet with no difficulties on the way as they fly over them, but all their difficulties arise when they are established” (Machiavelli, 1935, p. 27).

These private citizens became rulers because of their good fortune. Their political dominance was a direct result of their good wealth. In contrast to individuals who put in a lot of effort to use their skills to gain political power, these private citizens made their way by using luck. Their fortune may have come from aristocrats, noble friends, or their own wealth.

This ruler's lack of political expertise will make him ineffective in his role. His lack of experience in state governance is due to his life before he accumulated political authority. This ruler is dependent on the people who installed him to power because the loyalty of the army is not to him but to the installing army (Machiavelli, 2014b, p. 25). For this reason, the installed ruler must cultivate a positive rapport with his noble allies. As what Fabrizio has said in Machiavelli's *Art of War*, he said,

"I would imitate the Romans. I would draw from the wealthiest, I would give them heads in the mode in which they are given to the others today, and I would arm and train them... Indeed, but only as much as is necessary to feed their horses. For bringing expense to your subjects would enable them to complain of you" (Machiavelli, 2003, p. 32).

It is fitting that he must follow the mandate of the people who helped him attain political power.

The army will turn against the installed monarch if he is unable to have good connections with his noble friends. The populace of the state will rise up in rebellion against the monarch if the army no longer supports them. This will be the beginning of the prince's downfall. The prince must therefore refrain from harming those who assisted him in gaining political authority. Also, the prince needs to be careful about the choices he makes so that he doesn't make mistakes in governing. It has been said in Chapter VII of *The Prince*:

"He who believes that new benefits will cause great personages to forget old injuries is deceived. Therefore, the duke erred in his choice, and it was the cause of his ultimate ruin" (Machiavelli, 2014a, p. 38).

6.3. Political Power and Wickedness

Wickedness is characterized as moral depravity, encompassing sin and criminality (Smith, 2003). Obtaining political power by malevolence is a strategy advocated by Niccolò Machiavelli. An individual attains political power through malevolence by perpetrating crimes. An individual usurps authority devoid of morality. According to Niccolò Machiavelli, "The business of a prince is to make himself and his people secure against all possible enemies, and to do this he must often act wickedly, because the world is so wicked that he cannot, otherwise, attain his end (Allen, 1928)." From this section, Machiavelli sees wickedness as a means to an end.

Some rulers made their way through immorality. Alexander the Great is one of these tyrants who gained political dominance by deceit. Pausanias, Alexander's bodyguard, killed Alexander's father Philip in 336 B.C. Alexander ascended to the Macedonian king at the age of 20, eliminating his opponents before they could contest his authority. According to Machiavelli, one instance of wickedness is the crime that Alexander the Great committed. One ascends to the principality through either malevolent or unscrupulous means (Machiavelli, 2014a, p. 39). Consequently, through malevolence, the prince who attained sovereignty would ultimately devolve into a tyrant. A prince rules by law, and it was recognized in the force of corruption to transform him into a tyrant (Kalyvas, 2007). A prince who disregards the laws of the state is deemed a malevolent ruler. Consequently, a prince who attains political power via malevolence is regarded with fear by his subjects. One of the examples is Adolf Hitler. Giles (2021) puts it by stating that, "Hitler told me he had read and reread *The Prince*. It has disencumbered him from plenty of false ideas and prejudices. It is only after having read *The Prince* that Hitler understood what politics really is."

The people of the state would not exhibit any indications of rebellion against the prince when fear is deeply ingrained in their minds. It would be difficult for a monarch to be adored by the people if the people are subjected to an excessive amount of wickedness. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that a sovereign must also acquire the ability to be adored by their subjects. In Machiavelli's narrative, Agathocles and Oliverotto da Fermo are exemplified as rulers who imposed absolute depravity. In his book, Machiavelli discusses the political authority that Agathocles and Oliverotto attained, only to later experience ruin. Similar to Oliverotto, Agathocles executed all individuals and members of the Syracuse senate. His brutal harshness and boundless malevolence preclude him from being esteemed among the most distinguished individuals (Machiavelli, 2014a, p. 61). His success is therefore not ascribed to fortune or virtue. However, killing fellow people, lying to friends, lacking faith, mercy, or religion cannot be considered a talent; such tactics may bring empire, but they cannot provide honor. In other words, even if the usurper gains political power, those around him will only pretend to support him.

The people around the prince are merely acting because they are afraid of him, thus the

prince will not have a glorious kingship. Complete immorality may hurt the prince, and persistent immorality would make it difficult for the prince to maintain his kingship. This is because those who are close to the prince will undoubtedly hope for his harm in order to put an end to his immorality. As a result, the prince's reign would soon be doomed. After one year of committing parricide, Oliverotto was strangled (Machiavelli, 2014a). Indeed, wickedness serves as a potent means of obtaining political authority. However, due to the unavoidable conditions, there is no guarantee that the prince will retain his kingdom for an extended duration. Motivated by fear, those surrounding the prince may betray him. Moreover, the prince shall discover no honor in the absence of love.

6.4. Political Power through Civil Principality

Man consistently selects what is good (Hardie, 1979). As a result, people in society constantly put their needs and desires first. One of their focuses is security. They must thus select a leader who is able to comprehend their needs and desires. In light of this, Niccolò Machiavelli views civil principality as a means of gaining political authority. Moving on to the next point, a civil principality is a situation in which a prominent citizen ascends to the position of prince of his nation with the support of his fellow citizens rather than via immorality or unacceptable violence (Machiavelli, 2014b, p. 45).

Machiavelli's approach for a prince to attain power remains pertinent in modern society. In private organizations or communities, individuals select a leader with whom they feel at ease. Individuals do not select this type of person due to their apprehension about him. They select this citizen to assume a leadership role due to their confidence in him. Benjamin Barber argues that "The ultimate power of the society are the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion (Howe, 2016)." The people are the ruler's source of authority. The ruler is chosen by the people after careful consideration. In order for good governance to be established, citizens must be taught how to use their right to vote. Thus, the installation of a virtuous king would be the result of their discussion. Benjamin Barber is a strong supporter of every citizen's rights. In the absence of the populace, the monarch is merely a common man with no authority. They assert that this prince will safeguard and uphold societal peace. The populace, recognizing their inability to oppose the nobles, extol the merits of one among them and elevate him to princely status to secure protection under his leadership. (Machiavelli, 2014b, p. 45).

Selecting a citizen to have a leadership position shows that the populace is prepared to submit. The installed prince's laws are true and unchangeable. People in the society are therefore required to follow. People will willingly follow without any violent opposition as they are aware that the prince they established was the result of their careful consideration. Machiavelli goes on to stress the value of keeping cordial connections with the populace. He stated,

"A man who becomes king with the support of the people, then, must keep those people on his side. This is easy enough since all they want is to be free from oppression. But the man who becomes king against the will of the majority and with the support of the wealthy nobles must make it an absolute priority to win over the affection of the common people. This will be easy if he takes them under his protection. When people are treated well by someone, they thought was hostile they respond with even greater loyalty; they'll go over to his side at once and be even more devoted than if he had taken power with their support. There are all kinds of ways a king can win the people's affection, but since these depend on particular circumstances and one can hardly lay down rules, I'll leave them out of our discussion. I'll just conclude, then, that a ruler must have the people on his side; otherwise, when things get tough there'll be no way out" (Machiavelli, 1935, p. 40).

Machiavelli implies that the prince ought to keep a cordial connection with those who put him in power. The prince's behavior cannot be altered prior to his installation. It must remain in place because of the prince's obvious personality, which helped him win the election. The people are therefore only loyal to the prince's kingship and not to anyone else. The prince is at danger of encountering danger when he rises from civil order to absolute monarchical rule.

7. Ethical Implications of Machiavelli's Theory

Machiavelli's political theory represents a radical departure from traditional ethical

frameworks by deliberately separating politics from morality. In works such as *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*, he emphasizes that the effective exercise of political power often requires actions that may contravene conventional moral norms (Machiavelli, 2014a; Skinner, 2019). Unlike classical or Christian political philosophy, which grounds legitimacy in moral virtue and adherence to divine or natural law (Gilson, 1955; Nederman, 2005), Machiavelli assesses political actions in terms of their outcomes and their contribution to the stability and survival of the state. This analytic separation challenges the prevailing assumption that ethical conduct is inherently compatible with political success, suggesting instead that rulers may need to act pragmatically, and at times immorally, to secure the common good.

A central implication of this separation is the justification of actions traditionally regarded as immoral, including deceit, coercion, and calculated cruelty, when they serve the preservation of political order (Machiavelli, 2014a; Mansfield, 1996). Machiavelli's insistence on such pragmatic measures has led to the enduring interpretive question of whether he is endorsing tyranny or merely describing the realities of political life. Some scholars argue that his work advocates ruthless authoritarianism, as rulers are depicted wielding power without moral restraint (Russell, 2005; Nederman, 2005). Others contend that Machiavelli is a proponent of political realism: a theorist providing practical guidance for navigating the contingencies of power, rather than a moral prescription for oppressive governance (Strauss, 1958).

The concept often summarized as "the ends justify the means" emerges as an interpretative lens for understanding Machiavelli's ethical stance. While Machiavelli does not explicitly formulate this phrase, his writings suggest that the success and security of the state may legitimize actions that would otherwise be condemned on moral grounds (Machiavelli, 2014a; Abellanosa, 2019). This principle underscores a consequentialist approach to political ethics, where the morality of an act is subordinated to its utility in achieving and maintaining political stability. Nevertheless, Machiavelli also emphasizes prudence and foresight, indicating that reckless immorality may backfire and undermine the ruler's authority (McCormick, 2001; Skinner, 2019).

Critiques from moral philosophers and religious thinkers have long challenged Machiavelli's separation of ethics and politics. Christian theologians condemned his apparent indifference to moral law, and Enlightenment philosophers often interpreted his work as a manual for cynical opportunism (Gilson, 1955; Deitz, 1986). However, republican readings highlight his concern for civic virtue, the common good, and the establishment of stable institutions, suggesting that his prescriptions are intended to protect, rather than exploit, the state (Viroli, 1998; Pocock, 1975). This duality has produced divergent interpretations: authoritarian readings focus on Machiavelli's tolerance for coercion and ruthlessness, whereas republican interpretations emphasize his advocacy for prudent, virtuous, and disciplined governance.

Modern scholarship situates Machiavelli within the broader tradition of political realism and leadership theory. Contemporary political analysts recognize his insights into power dynamics, crisis management, and the ethical dilemmas inherent in leadership (Boñol, 2026). His work informs discussions on strategic decision-making, the exercise of authority under uncertainty, and the reconciliation of practical governance with ethical ideals. Moreover, Machiavelli's thought retains relevance for contemporary politics, where leaders frequently confront complex choices that pit moral considerations against the demands of security, stability, and public welfare (McCormick, 2001; Abellanosa, 2019). By acknowledging the tensions between ethics and effectiveness, Machiavelli provides a framework for understanding political action as a domain in which moral compromise may be necessary for the preservation of the state.

Therefore, the ethical implications of Machiavelli's theory highlight the enduring tension between morality and political necessity. By separating ethical judgment from political action, justifying pragmatically necessary immorality, and providing tools for effective leadership, Machiavelli challenges conventional assumptions about the moral foundations of governance. His work continues to stimulate debate among scholars, informing both theoretical discussions in political philosophy and practical reflections on leadership in the modern world.

8. Conclusions

The consolidation of political power is central to effective governance, and Machiavelli's political theory offers a systematic framework for understanding how rulers acquire and

maintain authority. Success in political life, according to Machiavelli, depends not merely on moral virtue or inherited legitimacy, but on the ruler's ability to act decisively, adapt to circumstances, and strategically navigate the unpredictable forces of *fortuna*. *Virtù*, encompassing skill, courage, prudence, and adaptability, enables the prince to respond effectively to challenges and opportunities, ensuring the stability and longevity of the state.

Machiavelli's approach challenges conventional ethical assumptions by separating politics from morality. The exercise of political power may require actions that are morally ambiguous, including deception, coercion, or calculated cruelty. Yet, his theory is not an unqualified endorsement of immorality. The prince must exercise judgment, balancing benevolence and severity, and applying force or cunning only when necessary to protect the state. In this sense, effectiveness and prudence, rather than strict adherence to ethical norms, define successful governance. The ruler's capacity to manage perception, exploit opportunities, and act decisively reflects wisdom and bravery, highlighting the practical dimensions of *virtù*.

The interplay between *virtù* and *fortuna* is particularly significant. While fortune represents chance, external pressures, and unforeseen events, it does not render human action meaningless. Instead, the prince's *virtù* allows him to anticipate, mitigate, and even harness the effects of fortune, transforming potential threats into opportunities for consolidation of power. This dynamic underscores the pragmatic, realist orientation of Machiavelli's thought: political authority is secured not through idealized morality, but through preparation, strategic action, and the flexible exercise of judgment.

Machiavelli's insights remain relevant in contemporary political theory and leadership studies. His analysis demonstrates that effective governance often requires difficult decisions, ethical compromises, and a clear-eyed understanding of human behavior and institutional constraints. By emphasizing the importance of skill, foresight, and strategic action, Machiavelli provides enduring guidance for leaders navigating uncertainty and complexity.

In conclusion, Machiavelli's political theory illuminates the processes through which rulers attain and sustain power, showing that the combination of *virtù* and careful engagement with *fortuna* is essential for effective statecraft. His work remains a vital reference for understanding the moral and practical complexities of political leadership, demonstrating that the exercise of power is both an art and a necessity in the pursuit of stable governance.

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