



Reading Political Philosophy: From Machiavelli to Mill

Machiavelli: Nigel Warburton and Quentin Skinner

Nigel Warburton

Hello, I'm Nigel Warburton and I'm going to be talking to Quentin Skinner, who is Regis Professor of History at The University of Cambridge, about Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Quentin, *The Prince* is probably one of the most read of all political works. Does it justify that kind of attention?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Well, I think its notoriety stems partly from the great literary gifts that have gone into it, rather than its philosophical depth, but I think philosophically there is a point of deep importance in it, and it has become emblematic of a particular point of view in political philosophy, and not wrongly, and that is for its completely instrumental view about the place of the virtues in public life. Where the question of the appropriate behaviour to take politically, morally in any given situation is always determined by the end that you have in mind, and not by any considerations about the intrinsic morality of the behaviour. It is, I think, one of the very sharpest statements in our tradition of that particular picture, of how to think about morality and politics.

Nigel Warburton

Can I just take you back there, you used the word instrumental. What exactly does that mean in this context?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Well I suppose if you were going to produce a kind of 'periodic snapshot' of the theory that you find in *The Prince*, it would be something along the lines of saying, 'the prince who is the heroic figure who appears throughout this text, has certain goals which are specific to his role... whatever those goals are, when you've thoroughly seized what it is to be a true prince', (and that's the phrase Machiavelli is always using) 'then you've got to do what you've got to do'. And that's the point, that's what I meant by saying is 'completely instrumental'. You're not to be side tracked by any questions that might seem... questions about whether it's the moral thing to do.

Nigel Warburton

And yet he's not completely outside morality in what he's arguing, is he?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

No, by the 'moral thing to do' I meant, as morality is conventionally understood, he's writing this text in circumstances in which there is a very strongly prevailing picture of the virtues and their role in public life. And one of the things which he's trying to do in the book is to question that, to say that it might not be right in relation to the goals of the true prince to follow the virtues, is not to stand outside morality, it's to make a moral point about the place of the virtues in public life. So in a way I spoke too periodically to start with. It is a morality that you find in this text but it is, as I say, a completely consequentiality organised morality.

Nigel Warburton

What do you think we need to know about the historical context in order to understand *The Prince*?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Yes that's a large question because it has a history in the history of Florentine republicanism, and it also has a history in Renaissance humanist political philosophy. So we perhaps better

take those two issues separately and take them one by one. The historical context that you would need to understand is itself quite complicated. The book is written all in one long breath, in the summer of 1513. It's written in the aftermath of the collapse of the Florentine republic, which Machiavelli had actually served from 1498, as second chancellor of the republic. Now to say that the book was written in 1513 is to say that it was written at a very particular moment of political crisis in Florence.

The first thing one has to recognise is that Florence had traditionally been a republic. From the very earliest times it had been a self governing community, and that was so during Machiavelli's own lifetime. The crisis was that in 1512 the republic is overthrown, and the Medici who'd been in exile, as I say, since the 1490's are suddenly returned to power. This is a crisis for them however, because their return to power simply by the change in the alliance system in Italy, whereby the Pope in 1511 had signed a perfidious alliance in order to get the French out, with the Spanish who bring in their dreaded and enormous infantrymen, who effectively pulverised, or threatened to pulverise, the Florentine republic which surrenders without a new blow being struck, and everyone who has served that republic is now in exile.

Now that's the moment that Machiavelli, like many others, realises that the republic is over, and that if you're going to commend yourself to the regime, you're going to have to commend yourself to new princes. But notice, new princes in the highly vulnerable position, that they had come to power not by their own merits but by sheer good luck, by the power of foreign arms, and who had come to power in a community that had been traditionally a republic, and in which there are going to be a great number of disgruntled aristocrats as well as servants of the republic, who are used to a system of self government. So that's the scene that one needs to set, to understand what's going on in the first half of Machiavelli's book.

Nigel Warburton

So that's the political situation in Florence when Machiavelli was writing, but clearly there's also a literary and intellectual background against which he is writing.

Prof. Quentin skinner

That's absolutely right, and it's equally critical to an understanding of what's going on in the text. Speaking rather crudely what one would want to say, is the great tradition of Florentine political theory had been a tradition of neoclassical humanist political theory, a tradition in which the question of what virtues you needed as a citizen to be part of a self governing community, were central. And that tradition stemmed mostly from a single book, that is, Cicero's *De Officiis*, *Concerning One's Offices*, which is probably the most widely read text of political theory in the entire western tradition, because it was the text out of which everyone learnt their Latin, and learnt what it was to be a good citizen. And we know, because there was a lending library in Florence from which Machiavelli's father was able to borrow this book, that he repeatedly borrowed it in Machiavelli's youth, mentions in his diary that he did so, and the boy certainly learnt, basically, from his Cicero.

A further point that needs to be made, however, about the development of humanist political theory in 15th century Italy, stems from the fact that, except in Florence, most of the communities moved from being self governing republics to the rule of princes, and a genre of political theory developed which was usually known as the mirror for princes genre, that form of political theory in which the prince looked into the book as it were looking into a mirror, and saw the image of himself that he was expected to cultivate.

Now, in addition to Cicero, whose view of the princely virtues was easily adaptable from the account of the civic virtues, two absolutely crucial texts here are those of Seneca, his '*On Clemency*', '*De Clementia*' and '*De Beneficiis*' 'concerning benefits' in which the question of liberal and generous behaviour (as well as just behaviour) is made central to the image of *The Prince*. And what we find in the later 15th century, in the immediate chronological background to a writer like Machiavelli, is a great efflorescence, especially in the kingdom of Naples, where there's a large humanist community writing tracts which are mostly called *The Prince*, about the proper virtuous behaviour that a prince ought to aspire to. So that would be the intellectual background against which Machiavelli comes to write when he settles down in his farm in 1513 in exile from the city to write *The Prince*.

Nigel Warburton

You said that Machiavelli was a great stylist, I think, and one aspect of that is the organisation of the book as a whole.

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Yes indeed. It's an extremely tightly organised book, and perhaps I should try to say a word in the way of trying to give a map of how to read the book as it seems to me. Would that help?

Nigel Warburton

Yes.

Prof. Quentin Skinner

I think that the book divides absolutely in half at Chapter 11, and that means that it falls into two halves which, in my view, in turn fall into two halves. So that really the book is in four parts, and Machiavelli signals this himself. At the very beginning, Chapter 1, he says, that his first theme is going to be 'What are the different types of states there can be?' and he says that's going to be his subject matter in the first five chapters, and then he's going to ask the question, 'How can you hold on to them?', and that's going to carry him from Chapter 6-11. Now Chapters 1-5, look like a pure typology.

He begins by saying 'Well, there are republics and principalities, and then some principalities are hereditary and some are new, and then some are partly new and some are wholly new, and then some have always been principalities, and some used to be republics', and that carries us through from Chapters 1-5, and it looks a fairly boring typology. But I think anyone reading this book in 1513, they would have seen the way in which it's organised is intended to direct you to the most dangerous position in which you can be as a prince, which in turn turns out to be exactly the position that the Medici were in in Florence. Because the most dangerous position, Machiavelli says, is when you come to power in a principality that used to be a republic, where you are not a hereditary but a new prince, and where you have no participate yourself, and thus are a wholly new prince.

And if you think about, it that filters the typology through the story of how the Medici had come to power in the previously republican Florence. And he says then that his advice is necessary, above all, for people in that most dangerous position, 'If you're a hereditary prince, then you ought to be able to govern without any difficulty'. He says 'The real difficulty is where there is hatred of princes, and where you are the prince, and that's the position in which the Medici find them. So there's Chapters 1-5. And then in Chapters 6-11, he says, 'Well how can you come to power? The best way is by', and here's the magic word in the book, 'by your own *virtue* or', next chapter, 'you can come to power by sheer good luck by *fortuna*, and then the other chapters say, 'Well, or so you can be elected or', and this is a great joke, 'another way of coming to power as a prince in Italy is to be the Pope, which is a sort of joke about how really the papacy is just another principality in Italy.

But notice there, in those chapters, we're still talking about Florence, although it seems to be a typology merely because the Medici are an example of the yet more dangerous case in which, instead of coming to power by their own virtue, they came to power by sheer *fortuna*. And so by the time you've come to the end of the first part of the book, you realise that Medici are really up to their neck in it, and that they need advice desperately, and then the second half of the book says, 'Okay, you're this prince, now listen up, I'm going to tell you how to govern'.

Nigel Warburton

So, in a sense, you're saying it's slightly cynical in its organisation that Machiavelli is using this almost as a calling card, to get reinstated by the Medici.

Prof. Quentin Skinner

I think that's exactly right. He's living in a new world in which the republic is over. He's lost his job, he's accused in taking part in the conspiracy, he's tortured and exiled, he needs back,

but the world has changed and he needs back as an advisor to princes, and he is one of the very many people who offer advice to the new princes of Florence at this time.

Nigel Warburton

So let's move on to the second half of the book. What would you say are the main themes running through the second half?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

The second half is organised into two parts. They're very unequal, but they tell you a lot about how Machiavelli sees the figure of the prince. There's a block of Chapters, 12, 13, and 14, which is what he first talks about, and this is the prince as a military leader. These, I think, are slightly old fashioned chapters, where he tells you, 'Avoid mercenaries, raise a citizen army, but above all, lead yourself'. His is still this highly militaristic, military leader first of all, and that's the first thing we learn about him. And then from Chapter 15 onwards, Machiavelli says at the beginning of Chapter 15, 'Okay now I'm going to tell you how to behave as a prince', and then immediately he says, 'Look I'm fully aware that everyone has written about this', clear allusion to the mirror for princes literature, there's a huge literature on this, and he makes it clear that he thinks the literature is junk, and that it's completely unreal, and his aspiration is to say something that's going to be useful to princes. And that carries us right through to Chapter 24, which is interestingly the chapter which explains why the princes of Italy have lost their states, and that is a summarising chapter because, once you've seen everything he's told you, you'll see why they've lost their states, because they've failed to do what he's said. That's the end of the book, except for the two very rhetorically dramatic chapters, with which it actually ends. The first, on *fortuna*, and how much fortune actually governs human affairs, and therefore how little there is to be said about state craft, and finally the exhortation to the Medici that if they've learnt everything that he said in this book, then they will be able to liberate Italy from the barbarians, that is to say to get the French out to get the Spanish out, and to make Italy new and great.

Nigel Warburton

What do you make of this last chapter?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

It is oddly limited in its imaginative vision. I think that Italian political theorists of this period were obsessed by the thought of Rome. It was all around them, in the buildings and in their political forms, and in their language, and they thought of the renewal of Italy as the renewal of Rome. Rome was a small city state which rose to govern the whole world, why shouldn't Florence a small city state rise in a similar way? And the great emblem of this is Michelangelo's David, placed in 1506 immediately outside Machiavelli's office. And why David? Well, David is in Michelangelo's great statue armed just with his sling, but the impression is that Florence, although small, will nevertheless be victorious. But of course, that is now what happened. Italy became a cockpit for the fight between the Hapsburgs and the Valoire throughout the 16th century, and was ruined by that until, roughly speaking, 1950.

Nigel Warburton

The history of Florence is actually a fascinating topic in itself, and I'm sure we could talk for quite a long time about that, but I want to get back to the core concerns as I see them in *The Prince*, the philosophical concepts of virtue in particular, and *fortuna*.

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Yes.

Nigel Warburton

What would you say Machiavelli meant by virtue?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Well that's the key question I think in the text. Now, in order to understand the concept of virtue, let us call it that for a moment, in Machiavelli, you have to see that what he means by this is the qualities by virtue of which you're going to be able to attain the true goals of *The Prince*. Now there are really two goals of *The Prince* which are indispensable, and one is

picked up in a phrase that echoes throughout this book, which is 'You've got to be able to maintain yourself in power', you've got to be able *montonairi lo starto*, to maintain your state. Maintain your state as a prince, not suffer a coup d'etat, a blow against your state, so keep the thing going, that's the first duty of the true prince. But all of that is in order to attain your final goals as a prince, which are, in this life, honour and glory, and as a result, in the next life fame, posthumous fame as a result of honour and glory in this life. So the goal of the true prince, and notice the almost blasphemous biblical allusion here, is 'The power and the glory', that's what it is to be a true prince, and *virtus*, is the name of the quality that gains you glory by means of overcoming *fortuna*, which is the name fortune. Now that leaves the question, 'Yes, but what is virtue? What is this quality, or set of qualities that enable you to triumph over fortune?' And that's the crux of the book, is the answer to that question, and that is where the classical analysis would come in. Because if you ask Cicero, who makes this the central question of *De Officiis*, 'Well what is virtue?', his answer is, 'It's the virtues, it is the cardinal virtues, and the princely virtues that go to make up this quality'. This is what's picked up in the whole of that Renaissance tradition that I spoke of earlier, of the mirror for princes, is first of all justice. *The Prince* must be just, and that is a manly quality, and there's a construction of masculinity all through this book, because *virtus*, the Latin virtue, is also the quality of the *via*, and 'via' in Latin means the real man. There are two words for man in Latin. *Homo*, which just means man or woman, and *via* from which we get *virile*, which means the real man by contrast with the woman. And, the real man is also contrasted with the brute.

So the real man is never brutal, and is never beastly. So manliness and beastliness are constantly contrasted here in the Ciceronian tradition. And in Cicero, there are two ways in which you might never be beastly or brutal if you want to be a true and just man, and one is that you must never act by sheer force. The beastliness of brute force is figured as the lion in Cicero, and also, contrary to manliness, because it's despicable and low, is fraud. And the brute or the beast who is fraudulent is figured in Cicero as the fox, and these are the qualities that must above all be avoided by the truly manly figure, who always honours his word and keeps face, and that's the foundation of his justice; he is never underhand, he always argues and never uses force.

But in addition, since we're speaking of *The Prince*, there are two other elements to the virtue of *The Prince* which are crucial which are more than justice, and these are the two elements that Seneca had particularly spoken of. One way of offering more than justice is to offer clemency, which is justice in something better, and another is to offer liberality, which is justice to people, and then something more than justice. And so, the figure of the true prince is the just, the generous, the clement figure, and that Ciceronian Senecan ideal, is (I think we must use this word) satirised by Machiavelli in the next chapters of *The Prince*. Because the satire, I think, could be put in the form of what I think is the central contention of this book which is, 'If you think that those are the qualities that are going to enable you to maintain your state, and attain honour and glory and fame everlasting, you are wrong'. That's what the book wants you to see. There's a hideous mistake at the heart of Renaissance moral theory, that indeed *virtus* is the name of that which gets you glory, but this isn't true *virtus*.

Nigel Warburton

So it's fair to say he's extremely pessimistic about human nature in his description of what actually happens?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Absolutely, and of course part of what makes the book gripping is that that sense that human nature is despicable, and is actually brutal, and beastly, is heavily dramatised, and is, I think it would be fair to say, talked about with a certain relish in the book which was intended to be shocking. And especially in Chapter 15 where it's laid out as everyone is always fickle, no-one keeps their word, that's the world we're living in. If you try to live in the world of the virtuous you will come unstuck in the real world, and that's the tone that he takes towards humanist political theory.

Tessa Combs

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Nigel Warburton

In Chapter 8 Machiavelli talks about Agathocles who, in his eyes, was little more than a thug, never a true prince. But how does he differ from Cesare Borgia who uses similarly violent means to achieve the end of running the state?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Yes, good. Well perhaps I didn't put the point sufficiently clearly. If you ask Machiavelli 'Well, what does this virtuoso prince do positively, if what *The Prince* realises is that the virtues conventionally understood do not bring you glory? What is the positive message of this text?' And that answer, I think, would be one that distinguishes Agathocles from Cesare Borgia because Agathocles thought that what you do is you behave effectively as a thug, you under all circumstances terrorise people, and if the senate disagrees with you you have them massacred, which is the example Machiavelli gives. Well, that keeps you in power alright, but that is a very inglorious way to behave. What's inglorious about it is that it wasn't necessary, and what's important about Cesare is that although he understood that sometimes it is necessary to be cruel, what he also understood is that there's a difference between a prince and a thug, and the truly virtuoso prince, and notice that Renaissance word here, the prince of true virtue, is the one who follows the ordinary understanding of the virtues and what people value as far as possible. What he knows is when to judge that he has gone as far as possible, and will have to turn again the virtues in the name of maintaining his state and acquiring glory. So that the truly virtuoso prince, Machiavelli puts it in a very interesting reflexive verb in the Italian, is someone who knows *volgersi*, how to turn and turn about, as he says in Chapter 18, as fortune and the times dictate. You turn to the virtues as far as possible, but you must be willing to turn away from them when that is necessary. What Agathocles never discovered, because he was just a thug, is that it's not always necessary to turn away from the virtues, and that the judgement of the truly virtuoso prince is the judgement as to when it's necessary.

Nigel Warburton

Would it be fair to say that what Machiavelli thinks Cicero and Seneca got wrong was that they thought that if you behaved virtuously then you would necessarily be able to be an effective leader? When in fact, the truth of the matter is that you might be lucky, and turn out to be the case, and you might not, and actually there are more effective ways of achieving the end than simply always behaving according to conventional virtue.

Prof. Quentin Skinner

That's exactly right, and Machiavelli has a wonderful way of putting this, which picks up this point we've been making about the figuring of *The Prince*, as a particular kind of masculine man. He says that the ancients understood state craft better, when they figured *The Prince* as a centaur. The centaur is half man and half beast, and that's what it is to understand state craft. Manly virtue will never be enough, you've got to be ready for beastliness, and the centaur is half beast. Now, that is presented directly as a satire of Cicero.

Cicero had said, 'Force is beastly and is to be avoided, that is simply the lion. Fraud is beastly and that is to be avoided, that is simply the fox'. And Machiavelli says, 'Since you need to know how to be beastly, you had better know which particular beasts to imitate, and then in the most famous phrase in the book he says, 'Those who have done best as princes in our time have known how to imitate the lion and the fox'. And so it's a turning of the Ciceronian picture absolutely on its head, a great satirical moment, which would be shocking to his contemporaries, all of whom would have known that text intimately, that he is saying, not manliness but beastliness.

Nigel Warburton

So some leaders fail because they're squeamish, but others fail just by chance events no matter how virtuous they are. What does Machiavelli have to say about fortune in human affairs?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Well that's a crucial question and it's very good to bring this out, because that relates back to the case of Cesare Borgia, who Machiavelli says in his chapter on Cesare, did everything that

a prudent prince would do and was defeated by fortune, and you can be. Fortune is figured in this text as a woman, *la fortuna e una donna*, and it's a horrendously sexist discussion, because fortune is a woman just in the sense that fortune is the unreliable force. It's contrary to reason, you would have to understand it intuitively but, and this brings out yet more the figuring of the masculine and the feminine in this book, fortune wishes to be dominated by the real man, the *via* with *virtus*, the male force is what dominates *fortuna*, the female force. And that is the advice that you would have to give to a prince as the best that you can hope to do in the face of fortune.

Fortune may defeat you as it defeated Cesare against all his expectations, because he fell ill at the time when his enemies invaded, but you can do something. But we have to unpack this metaphor of the woman fortune and the male prince, and ask, 'What political advice is secreted in that metaphor?' And the answer comes from Livy, as so much of Machiavelli does, and one of the adages of Livy which Machiavelli likes most of all, which is, '*fortuna fortes aduvat*' – 'fortuna favours the brave'. And the political advice always is, 'In the face of fortune, always act, always be impetuous'. And there's the sexual metaphor coming out again. The young man, as he says at the end of the chapter on fortune, is always the impetuous one, he always acts, he may come to grief, but that's the way to win fortune. Fortune like impetuous young men.

Nigel Warburton

So is *The Prince* just a satire on Cicero, or is there something more subtle underneath Machiavelli's treatment of *virtus*?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

Well I think it is basically a satire on Cicero. By satire of course I don't mean, nor do you, that he didn't mean it. He means every word in this book, and passionately, but he thinks that there's something ridiculous in Cicero, and that it's very important that people should understand that the humanist tradition is ridiculous, and what's ridiculous is the belief that *virtus*, spelt out as the cardinal virtues, and centring on justice is in fact the means to produce greatness and glory and states it sometimes is, but it often isn't. So that's really, in a nutshell, what the book says. But I must admit, picking up your thought, that, when you read those central chapters on the virtues, Chapters 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 in *The Prince*, where this is gone into in great depth, there are other things going on in those chapters which are more subtle, and maybe even doubtfully coherent with what we've said so far. And I would like to say a word about these two points, because they're rarely brought out, it seems to me.

And the first is, that as we said earlier on in our discussion, in this neo-classical understanding of the virtues, *virtus* in the Latin, is the set of qualities by virtue of which you gain glory and greatness. But Machiavelli is saying that that isn't the way to become great. There's a question mark as to whether these are really the virtues, and that question mark is in these chapters. He says, 'These are the qualities that are held to be good, *tenuto buoni*'. People think they're virtues, people believe these are the virtuous qualities. There's a constant questioning in these chapters, as to whether these qualities, which don't in fact always bring you greatness, can really therefore be the virtues. And that's a very classical, although of course corruptly classical, doubt. And that's one point which I think any reader should be alerted to in each of these chapters. There's a question mark about that.

The other point, which I think is much deeper, comes out of Machiavelli's rhetorical training, and I think it's this. Sometimes we misname as virtuous courses of action which aren't really instances of the virtues. And I think he believes we do that a lot. In the two chapters that discuss the key Senecan idea of princely virtue, Chapter 16 that discusses liberality and Chapter 17 that discusses clemency – notice picking up Seneca's themes, picking up Seneca's titles – Machiavelli asks whether we don't too readily congratulate ourselves on these virtues when in fact we don't exhibit them.

Nigel Warburton

And what exactly do these chapters say?

Prof. Quentin skinner

In Chapter 16 he says, 'Look, when people think that they're practising the virtue of liberality, what they do is they give away a lot of money. Where does this money come from? It has to come from taxes, you can't keep doing that, because you're going to have to tax the people more and more. So maybe, parsimony is the true virtue of liberality in princes'. And that seems to me to be a very subversive thought underlying that chapter. That, yes, okay, liberality is a virtue, but do we understand what liberality would be in a prince? It can't just be giving away the people's money. Similar, with the discussion of cruelty. He says, for example, in that chapter, the Florentines, when they had the rising in Pistoia thought that they were clement when they refused to execute any of the ringleaders when they rounded them up. Now, he says, it would have been much more clement to do that, because what happened when they failed was they were thought to be wimps, and they had a complete insurrection on their hands. They had to put it down with enormous violence and with a cruelty which would have been much less if they'd just executed the ringleaders. Meanwhile, they congratulated themselves on their clemency. So again, he's saying, 'We congratulate ourselves on being clement. Do we really understand the virtue of clemency?' And he said similarly in that chapter of Scipio, 'Well, he was famous for his clemency, but that was because he refused to punish a mutiny. But the result was he had a second mutiny. Is this really clemency? I call it, he says, *una natora fatulai*, I call it laxness. It's not clemency'.

Nigel Warburton

That's fascinating, it actually leads into something I wanted to ask you about as well, which was, the fact that Machiavelli's book *The Prince* has been called subversive almost from the day it was published.

Prof. Quentin skinner

Absolutely, yes.

Nigel Warburton

Sometimes it's called immoral, sometimes even amoral. I wonder whether you think it deserves that kind of description.

Prof. Quentin skinner

Yes, well first of all we can't say that it's an amoral book, if by that we mean a book uninterested in morality. There was a period in the interpretation of this text when it caught the attention of a lot of American political scientists who were attracted by the fact that it contains a good deal of shrewd and rather cynical advice. But what came to be said in that period in the 50's and 60's, in particular in American commentary about *The Prince*, is that it's really a technical book. It's really a value-neutral account of how you ought to behave if you have certain ends which you wish to pursue. But in fact as I've been trying to say, it's a passionately engaged discussion of what true virtue is in a prince, and how that enables you to gain the true ends of a prince. So I see it as a passionately moral book. But of course, you might say, 'But it's a passionately immoral book because of what it actually says' and I agree that's a much more interesting question to raise.

Well on that point I think I would have two contrasting things I would want to say, and one is that if by 'immoral' you mean, as Leo Strauss and his school have wanted to say, 'contrary to the Christian virtues', then yes, Machiavelli does himself say at one point in Chapter 15 – this pivotal and notorious chapter where he introduces the *virtuoso* prince who is not always virtuous. He says 'I'm teaching you that sometimes you must learn, how not to be good', and it's interesting he doesn't say there, *virtuoso*, he says *buono*, a good person. 'Essarai non buono' – how not to be a good person. So he does see himself as, in part, teaching immorality, yes.

It's going to be important if you think of morality as Christian morality, sometimes to go against Christian morality. But the second point I'd want to make is that Machiavelli thinks that it's profitable to doubt whether Christian morality is the sort of morality that we want and you have to see Machiavelli, not so much as an immoralist but as not a Christian moralist. He thinks that Christianity has been a disaster from the point of view of the morality of the state. He never says that in *The Prince*, but at the beginning of book two of *The Discourse*, he says

that Christianity could have been, and it's a wonderful phrase, interpreted 'secondo le virtu'. It could have interpreted 'According to virtu in his sense'. That's to say, according to this concern with worldly glory and the means to attain it. But, he says, it hasn't been. It got into the hands of the monks whose conception of glory was not worldly glory but heavenly glory, as a result of which he says Christianity has caused us to lose interest in worldly glory, as a result of which, states are in a condition of decline and corruption.

Nigel Warburton

Isaiah Berlin in his essay *The Originality of Machiavelli*, argues that what makes Machiavelli so original and interesting is this idea that there's more than one morality. If you're a prince, you need to go against conventional Christian or classical morality, if you're an ordinary person, perhaps, you may want to carry on according to Christian or classical morality, but they're in some sense incompatible moralities, and we have to make a choice between them.

Prof. Quentin skinner

Yes exactly. Well that's exactly right about what Berlin says, except my own recollection of that remarkable essay is that he tends to contrast Machiavellian morality with Christian morality, where as you rightly say, that we would need to consider classical morality, which is not Christian but also not Machiavellian. And I think that set of observations of yours actually introduces a subtlety which is that, as far as I can see, Machiavelli's target is not mainly Christian morality. His target is a Ciceronian vision of classical morality which he thinks is ridiculous, because it purports to be an account of how to attain worldly glory, but it's a bad account of that.

So I think Berlin too much stressed the Christian, and too little stressed the classical. My other criticism of Berlin would follow from what I've said already, which is that Machiavelli is usually content, although we've seen there are some difficulties and subtleties here, but he's usually content to think, that the virtues, that's to say justice and liberality and clemency and so forth, are indeed the names of good qualities. But he never counsils you to avoid those qualities in the name of some other morality, that would be to be Agathocles the thug. On the contrary, he says, 'What you must do is to follow those qualities as much as you possibly can'. His morality says, where you find that you can't you mustn't be squeamish. So it is, as it were, the desire to be conventionally virtuous as far as possible, with the courage to avoid conventional virtue when you see that, in the name of the greatness and glory of yourself or the State, that is necessary.

Nigel Warburton

Do you think Berlin is right, though, to say that, the real originality of Machiavelli lies in his recognition of these two or more moralities?

Prof. Quentin skinner

Well, I think that there is a deep point that he noticed there, which is that Machiavelli wants you to recognise, that if you're a true prince, and the immoral act is indispensable, to maintaining the State in being, and promoting its glory, you mustn't be squeamish. Because your duty as a prince is to recognise that that's what you've got to do Berlin is both rights to say that that's what he wants to tell you, and to make this strong contrast with Christian humanism. However, if you think of the classical tradition, and especially the roman law tradition, there is a tag of roman law which tells you that the safety of the people is the supreme law, '*Salus populi suprema lex*', and that classical thought really is rather like Machiavelli's thought, which is to say, 'Well if the safety of the people is itself in jeopardy, what do you do? Well you don't abdicate, you recognise that their safety is for you the supreme law, and you act in the name of preventing their safety from being undermined'. Now, that is Machiavelli's thought, and as always, although Machiavelli has his own shift and his own ambiguities, he is a classical moralist.

Nigel Warburton

Well clearly Machiavelli's got a lot of negative things to say about the intellectual tradition and the treatment of the virtues, particularly, in that tradition. Is there anything positive he's got to say?

Prof. Quentin skinner

Yes, well, the positive advice to *The Prince* is, I think, the most important thing that comes out of this critique we've talked about in the Chapters 15-24, and I think he does have a number of positive things that he wants to say, one of which we've talked about which is, 'Since you're going to have to be not good some of the time, you must minimise that. Don't be Agathocles, you're not a thug. You are a prince. Be courageously evil where it's necessary to be evil, but otherwise follow what people regard as the virtues as much as possible. Because if you don't, they'll hate you, and if they hate you, you're in trouble'.

But there are two other things that I think he wants to say to *The Prince*, and this brings out more than anything I've tried to say the Machiavelli who is, you know, the hated figure in the Shakespeare plays, the figure of Iago. 'The murderous Machiavelli', as Shakespeare says. And one is it's very important to Machiavelli that if you do have to be not good, you mustn't worry. 'Don't worry about it', is what he's always saying. 'If it's really indispensable to upholding the state that you should conduct this judicial murder, you must do it, but then don't lose any sleep over it'. And he says that very much over parsimony. 'Don't worry about having a reputation for being a miser because it means you will be able to lower taxes. In the end they will like that. They will even call it true liberality, so don't worry about that. And also don't worry about being someone who gains a reputation for being cruel. A new prince who is going to succeed in remaining in power cannot avoid that reputation, because there are going to be occasions when you do things which people will call cruel. You've got to do them, don't worry about that.' And that's a sort of insistent leitmotif that runs through all of those chapters which is reassuring to *The Prince*.

The other point that he wants to make is the Machiavelli as the 'cloak and dagger' figure, which is whenever you have to behave contrary to the virtues, try to make it seem that that's not what you're doing. And so his other really important piece of positive advice is central to *The Prince*. 'You're going to have to cheat, you must do your best to appear not to be cheating', and that again is satirical in respect of Cicero's *De Officiis*, because one of the things which Cicero keeps telling us is, 'Fraud will always be found out. So you cannot gain true glory by pretence', I'm now quoting Cicero, 'because your pretences will always find you out'. And that becomes a biblical thought too. 'Be sure your sins will find you out'. Now, one of the most important things that Machiavelli wants to tell *The Prince* is not to worry about that, because it's not true. And he's very keen on the fact that *The Prince* is not performing his politics in republican conditions. In republican conditions, you're out in the piazza, everyone has a vote, it's all public. People are watching you. You've only been elected, their turn will come, it's a communal activity, everything is in the bright light of day. It's not so for *The Prince*. He's inside his palace, he's inside his closet. He's got his advisors, the people are not voting you in, it's all court politics, and what he says about that is that everyone is condemned to judge by appearances. So appearances are everything, and he says that what protects you, and it's a very interesting phrase is, *la miesta da lo stato*, often mistranslated as, 'the majesty of the state', but he is telling you that what protects you is, your majesty, the majesty of your state as a prince, the fact that you live in a palace, you're not available, you wear splendid robes, you look wonderful, you look credible. You're able to put on a good show. That's all that matters he says, they're not really going to find out what you're doing, keep it secret, and since you're a prince you can, and don't lose any sleep. So that's the sort of theatrical Machiavelli, and it's definitely there.

Nigel Warburton

How do you think we should approach a work like Machiavelli's *The Prince*? I mean, do we need to understand a great deal about the context in which it was written in order to get a grasp, or would a close reading give us what we need?

Prof. Quentin skinner

Well I think that the crucial thing to say about all these great texts in the history of philosophy, to which we attend, is that you can do whatever you like with them, and what you do with them has its own legitimacy. That's to say, you can read them simply from cold and, because they're at some very general level addressing the human condition and because you were part of it, it would be impossible for your sensibility not to be affected by them, and for you not to be able to learn from them quite directly. It would be absurd to deny that, and of course,

much of the excitement, the kind of Gadamer excitement of close readings, is your engagement from your horizon (to use Gadamer's image) with somebody else's horizons, where that somebody else is a genius. And that's why we do pay attention to the great texts in the history of philosophy; they're not a canon for no reason. They are usually, as Machiavelli is, works of extraordinary literary power, deep metaphorically, and often of real profundity. So I wouldn't want to deny any of that.

However, I'm an historian, and I do think that since these are historical texts, the question does arise as to whether there's an appropriate way of going about trying to recapture their historical identity, because they do have an historical identity. They're written within and for a particular culture at a particular time. Now, I believe that in the questions you've asked me, we've in effect given our answer to that, because it would be to say, first of all this comes out of Renaissance history and you'd better know a bit of the sort of Renaissance history, that you require in order to make sense of what kind of an intervention this was. But moreover, this is a work of moral theory within a particular genre, the mirror for princes genre, and to understand the nature of the intervention constituted by this text you've got to understand that genre.

And so I think if you're interested in the historical identity of texts, those would be the two things that you would need to know, but historians mustn't make a mystery of that. It seems to me that in our conversation, we've covered as much of that kind of contextual material as is indispensable for you to get to work on the text yourself, and the real fun, I think, is doing that.

Nigel Warburton

That's fair enough, but is there a philosophical reason for reading the book?

Prof. Quentin Skinner

One of the arguments which is presented in this text as sharply as you will find it presented anywhere, is the problem sometimes known as 'dirty hands'. That's to say, if we accept the idea of conventional morality in which we're interested in the virtues and we're interested in the avoidance of vicious behaviour, so far as possible. The question arises as to whether we simply throw up our hands in politics, where we find ourselves in the mean streets, or whether in the name of some greater good that we believe in, we think that *The Prince* is someone who has to be able to walk those mean streets. Machiavelli believes deeply that that is the case, and he gives you some of the sharpest reflections that you can find in the literature that we have on this exact topic, on why you mustn't be squeamish about the problem of 'dirty hands'. And so if you wanted a philosophical reason to read this text for some exemplary ground, that would be the ground I would give.

Nigel Warburton

Thank you very much.