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Sinews of Power: How does Machiavelli reconcile ethics and political realism in his theory of inter- state politics?

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Abstract

Machiavelli has long been held as one of the inventors of international realism who separated politics from ethics. This article questions this conventional view and argues that Machiavelli is in fact a highly ethical thinker who reconciles ethics with realism in a coherent international relations theory. Acknowledging the desires for freedom innate in human nature and understanding men's consent to rule based on free will as a part of political power, Machiavelli views the two ethical standards – respect for desires for freedom and rule of law – as constitutive of state power that is indispensable for balance-of-power politics between states.

Introduction

Niccolo Machiavelli has long been conceived as an important yet controversial political thinker. Authors, philosophers and political theorists traditionally hold Machiavelli as the ‘Old Nick’ or ‘teacher of evil’ who renders politics as a dismal science. William Shakespeare calls him ‘the murderous Machiavel’.¹ Edmund Burke claims to see ‘the odious maxims of a Machiavellian policy’ during the Great Terror of the French Revolution.² Karl Marx insists that the true exponents of ‘Machiavellian policy’ are the ones who attempt ‘to paralyse democratic energies’ during revolutions.³ Bertrand Russel views *The Prince* as ‘a handbook for gangsters’.⁴ Indeed, for centuries, Machiavelli has never escaped the infamy of vice.

Nonetheless, despite centuries of infamy he suffered, Machiavelli was also celebrated as one of the inventors of modern political realism by 20th-century international relations scholarship. M. Wight views Machiavelli as ‘in a real sense the inventor of realism.’⁵ E. H. Carr acknowledged, ‘the essential tenets implicit in Machiavelli’s doctrine are the foundation stones of the realist philosophy.’⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz thinks, ‘ever since Machiavelli, interest and necessity – and *raison d’etat*, the phrase that comprehends them – have remained the key concepts of *realpolitik*.’⁷

In this way, if Machiavelli is indeed the ‘teacher of evil’, then 20th century international realism is truly the disciple of Machiavelli as this genre explicitly treats ethics

¹ Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Markus Fischer, ‘Machiavelli’s theory of foreign politics’, *Security Studies*, 5 No.2 (1995): 250.

⁵ M. Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press, 1994), 28.

⁶ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1964): 63.

⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 8.

as irrelevant to inter-state politics. As G. F. Kennan argues, ‘no ethical standards are applicable to relations between states.’⁸ Also, Hans Morgenthau deems his conception of international politics to be in a solemn contest with ‘moral political order ... to be achieved here and now’.⁹ More recently, John J. Mearsheimer thinks his offensive realism to be in clash with American moral sentiments for it does not ‘distinguish between good and bad states.’¹⁰

However, is it true that, as the disciple of Machiavelli, modern international realism should be irrelevant to ethics? It is beyond doubt that Machiavelli was one of the inventors of international realism. He acknowledges anarchy and self-help, ‘laws ... make them keep faith, but among sovereigns only force does.’¹¹ He regards competition as the root of inter-state politics, ‘it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire.’¹² And he emphasizes balance-of-power logic, ‘it is necessary first to see what assistance he may have and what hindrance in doing it.’¹³ Nonetheless, the political writings of Machiavelli also embody clear ethical commitments. For example, he argues, ‘victories are never so clear that the winner does not have to have some respect, especially for justice.’¹⁴ And ‘one cannot call it virtue to kill one’s citizens, betray one’s friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion’¹⁵ If so, as long as modern international realism is really the disciple of Machiavelli, it should not consider ethics as completely separated from international politics.

⁸ G. F. Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 48.

⁹ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1984), 3.

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 5.

¹¹ Machiavelli, Niccolo, ‘Words to Be Spoken on the Law for Appropriating Money’, in, *Machiavelli on International Relations* Marco Cesa (trans) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 57.

¹² Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), Chapter 3, Page 14. Henceforth referred to as P, with numbers indicating chapter and page.

¹³ Marco Cesa (edit), *Machiavelli on International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19.

¹⁴ P, 21.90.

¹⁵ P, 8.35.

Because, differing from his posterities, Machiavelli's political realism in fact displays an intriguing coexistence of realpolitik and morality. And this very coexistence in Machiavelli's realism points towards the possibility that international realism can in fact be reconciled with explicit ethical concerns, despite the way to foster this reconciliation being overlooked in our age.

Observing this significant difference between Machiavelli's political realism and his modern counterparts, the article aims at exploring the way in which Machiavelli reconciles political realism and ethical concerns in his theory on inter-state politics. Its main argument is that Machiavelli reconciles international realism with ethical concerns by making ethics a constitutive part of state power that contributes to a state's relative advantage in inter-state politics. Machiavelli thinks a state can increase its power vis-à-vis other states and use such power prudently via the observance of two ethical principles, respect for desires for freedom and rule of law. With state power accumulated and well-used based on these ethical tenets, both principalities and republics can better guarantee their security and expand their relative power in a volatile inter-state system.

This relationship between ethics and international realism is deeply rooted in Machiavelli's conception of human nature and political power. For Machiavelli, no matter how wicked and debased, human nature dictates that human beings always have the capability to accept or reject a political settlement out of their free will. And he views political power as consisting not only of material assets, such as arms and wealth, but also of men's rule over men based on consent made by free will. As long as a sovereign intends to gain power as men's consent to a political settlement and make good use of such power, he must acknowledge such inalienable capability and therefore respect his subjects and allies' free agency. Also, considering men's nature in having insatiable desires that always conflict

with other men's desires, a sovereign also needs to uphold the rule of law. Doing so realizes peoples' free agency without turning such respect for freedom into license.

Observing this set of ethical standards brings states three specific advantages in inter-state politics. First, doing so will allow a states to build a more capable army consisting of its own people and win over more reliable allies, which enhances their relative power vis-à-vis other states. Second, following these standards will enable states to build a virtuous domestic order that is more capable of preserving their security and expanding their relative power. Lastly, observing these ethical standards is essential for sovereigns to respect the nature of power and therefore to make prudent decisions that serve their security and power. In this way, just like sinews hold muscles together and allow muscles to exert strength, acting in accordance with Machiavelli's ethical standards enhances state power and allows a state to use such power prudently.

This article will base its argument on a careful reading of three major political works of Machiavelli: *The Prince*, *Discourses on Livy* and *Florentine Histories*. And it proceeds as the following. First, it will examine two concepts in Machiavelli's works, human nature and political power, which are indispensable for the following sections. Second, it will delineate the human nature realism of Machiavelli as a coherent theory on inter-state relations. Third, it will outline and interpret the socio-consequentialist ethical system of Machiavelli as well as its major ethical standards. Fourth, it will analyze the ways this socio-consequentialist ethical system fits into Machiavelli's human nature realism. Finally, it will conclude and shed implications on realism of our age via illuminating a possible way in which contemporary realism can incorporate ethical concerns: a more profound understanding of power based on careful examination of human nature and a re-engagement with the classics of political realism.

Human Nature and Political Power

Most political theories under the sun address two fundamental questions. The first is what kind of creature human beings are; and the second is what is political power.

Machiavelli's political realism makes no exception. Before the examination of the relationship between Machiavelli's political realism and his ethics, his conceptions of human nature and political power are going to be explored first. As these two concepts would be of enormous importance for us to grasp Machiavelli's political realism and ethics in the latter sections.

Human Nature

Machiavelli's works make three key assumptions concerning human nature. First, human beings possess selfish desires for worldly gains, which often go at the expense of other human beings. Second, men have the innate capacity to accept or reject their current condition no matter how servile or debased they are. Lastly, the nature of a man or a nation as well as human nature in general never change despite the passage of history, which makes investigations into ancient history pertinent to contemporary politics.

Machiavelli's first assumption about human nature is that human beings possess selfish desires for worldly gains, especially freedom. On the one hand, men fervently desire to acquire at the expense of other human beings; on the other hand, they also fear these desires of theirs be jeopardized by other men's similar desires. In *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli contends that 'it does not appear to men that they possess securely what a man

has unless he acquires something else new'.¹⁶ And 'as they possess much', they 'make an alteration with greater power', which 'inflames in the breasts of whoever does not possess the wish to possess so as to avenge themselves against them.'¹⁷ This aspect of human nature is also made well-known to Machiavelli's readers by his allegation in *The Prince*, that, men are 'ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gains ... men have less hesitation to offend one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared; for love is held by a chain of obligation, which, because men are wicked, is broken at every opportunity for their own utility.'¹⁸ As to the specific subjects of men's desires, Markus Fischer found it can be 'preservation, glory, domination, wealth and sexual pleasure' and so forth, which are all 'limited to existing passions'.¹⁹ Nevertheless, amongst all these worldly pursuits, the most fundamental and meaningful one is the desire for freedom. Erica Benner views the desire for freedom as 'the basic anthropological data' that must be presupposed by civil builders in Machiavelli's works.²⁰ And Machiavelli explicitly emphasizes the centrality of freedom amongst men's pursuits in *Discourses on Livy*. Regarding the question of how can a prince win over a people, Machiavelli's answer is 'he should examine first what the people desires.'²¹ And a people desire but two things, 'one, to be avenged against those who are the cause that it is servile; the other, to recover its freedom.'²² Therefore, freedom is central to men's worldly desires in Machiavelli's anthropology. Moreover, as Benner discovers, freedom for Machiavelli means not simply non-servitude, it essentially means being a co-authorizer of the political orders one lives under.²³

¹⁶ Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.5.4. Henceforth referred to as D, with numbers indicating book, chapter and paragraph.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ P 17.66.

¹⁹ Fischer, 'Machiavelli's theory of foreign politics', 260.

²⁰ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 184.

²¹ D 1.16.5

²² Ibid.

²³ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 226.

This essence of freedom is based on another assumption about human nature, that is, despite being ravenous and selfish, men have innate capacities to choose to accept or reject their current condition based on free will. This capability, according to Benner, is the ‘second nature’ of human beings for Machiavelli.²⁴ And Machiavelli’s men can display such capabilities under any circumstances, even if they are corrupted, enslaved or conquered. In Chapter V of *The Prince*, Machiavelli considers conquered people as being able to display such capacity. In this chapter, Machiavelli initially gave out three ways for princes to hold onto cities they conquered: ruining them, going there to live there personally and holding the conquered by creating a friendly oligarchy within them.²⁵ Nonetheless, after reflections on numerous failures to hold the conquered in history done by Spartans, Romans and Florentines, Machiavelli finally comes to the conclusion that ‘there is no secure mode to possess them other than to ruin them.’²⁶ That is, even if subjugated, a people can reject their conqueror’s reign out of free agency as long as they are not entirely wiped out. Furthermore, in the last chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli views the corrupted and miserable city states of Italy as still being able to expel ‘barbarians’ and liberate the whole of Italy. According to his descriptions, Italy at his time was ‘reduced to the condition ... which is more enslaved than the Hebrews, more servile than the Persians, more dispersed than the Athenians, without a head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn, pillaged, and having endured ruin of every sort.’²⁷ Nonetheless, Machiavelli still sees a great prospect of Italy in rejecting this miserable condition. For him, ‘there is very great readiness, and where there is great readiness, there cannot be great difficulty.’²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 231.

²⁵ P 5.20.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ P 26.102.

²⁸ P 26.103.

Lastly, human nature, though varying from man to man and nation to nation, never changes throughout the lengthy passage of time. An individual or a nation retains the same innate qualities despite changes in circumstances. In Chapter XXV in *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues, ‘a prince prospers today and comes to ruin tomorrow without having seen him change his nature or any quality.’²⁹ And ‘two persons working identically, one is led to his end, the other not.’³⁰ Therefore, history may create diverse circumstances as time goes on, but individuals never change their nature. One ‘patient and good’ will always be so, so does one who ‘proceeds impetuously’.³¹ This constant feature of human nature is further elaborated in *Discourses on Livy*. He argues again that ‘one man accustomed to proceed in one mode never changes’, as men ‘are unable to oppose that to which nature inclines us.’³² And such constancy also applies to the nature of nations. For him, a nation keeps the same custom for a long time. They are ‘either continually avaricious or continually fraudulent or having some other such vice or virtue.’³³ It is this very constancy of human nature that makes Machiavelli’s investigation into Roman history pertinent to inter-state relations of his time. And this constancy also makes his theories relevant to international relations of our age.

The Concept of Power

In overt contrast with his modern posterities, power for Machiavelli means not just material assets such as national wealth or military force. Power for Machiavelli essentially means the willing authorization people give to a political settlement. It is a concept that is ubiquitous, volatile and hard to measure in his works.

²⁹ P 25.99.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² D 3.9.3.

³³ D 3.43.1.

Machiavelli definitely understands material assets as a part of political power. He is conscious of the importance of accumulation of wealth to a state's power. For instance, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises princes to spend parsimoniously so that 'he can defend himself without burdening the people' during wars. He also advises a prince to 'inspire his citizens to follow their pursuits quietly, in trade and in agriculture and in every other pursuit of men' for the sake of 'expanding his city or his state'. More importantly, Machiavelli repetitively emphasizes the importance of military force for political power. As he contends in *The Prince*, 'there is no proportion between one who is armed and one who is unarmed, and it is not reasonable that whoever is armed obey willingly whoever is unarmed.' In other words, military force underwrites political power as one has no power over others without armed force. And Nathan Tarcov discovers, apart from Machiavelli, 'no political thinker has given arms a greater role in politics both foreign and domestic.'³⁴ Nevertheless, for Machiavelli, material assets alone are not enough to underwrite political power. The most quintessential part of political power is men's consent made out of their free will.

In fact, Machiavelli's second assumption regarding human nature – men have the innate capacity to use their free will to accept or reject their current condition – is especially pertinent to his conception of power. For Machiavelli, power essentially means men's consent to a given political settlement. As Benner argues, for Machiavelli, brute force alone does not constitute power as he understands power as men's exercise of their free agency.³⁵ That is, A has power over B when B accepts the condition of being ruled by A out of B's free will. Whether a state has power or not does not only depend on how much army or wealth it possesses, it also depends on whether people trust this state to command them out of free will

³⁴ Nathan Tarcov, 'Arms and Politics in Machiavelli's Prince'. In *Entre Kant et Kosovo: Etudes offertes à Pierre Hassner*, eds. Anne-Marie Le Gloannec and Aleksander Smolar, 122. (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2003).

³⁵ Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Prince: A New Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 311.

or not. Since men by nature have the capability to act in a given condition no matter how debased and fragile they are, a prince or a republic does not have power over men unless its own people or its conquered people use their free will to give consent to the sovereign's rule.

In this way, when men willingly authorize a political settlement to command them, then we can say this settlement gains power; when they reject a political settlement's authority with their free will, then this settlement is opposed by power. And this political settlement can refer to domestic sovereign, foreign conquest and inter-state alliances. Regarding domestic settlement, in Chapter XX of *The Prince*, Machiavelli thinks 'the best fortress' against external threats is 'not to be hated by the people'.³⁶ Because 'although you may have fortresses, if the people hate you, fortresses do not save you.'³⁷ As 'to people who have taken up arms foreigners will never be lacking to come to their aid'.³⁸ Hence, if a domestic sovereign's rule does not gain the consent of his people, they may become his subjects, but they confer no power on this sovereign which allows the sovereign to defend his security. Concerning foreign conquest, in *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli points out, 'nothing made it more laborious for the Romans to overcome the peoples nearby and parts of the distant provinces than the love that many peoples in those times had for freedom; they defended it so obstinately that they would never have been subjugated if not by an excessive virtue.'³⁹ So, if the cities Romans conquered did not authorize them to rule, then Rome gained a wasteland full of obstinate dissensions, not power. Finally, inter-state alliance also adopt this conception of power in Machiavelli's works. Also in *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli alleges, 'when one sees a war started by many against one, one ought always to make a judgment that one has to remain superior, if it is of such virtue that it can sustain the

³⁶ P 20.87.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ D 2.2.1.

first thrusts and with temporizing await the time.’⁴⁰ Because the one can always corrupt and disunite the many with ‘a little industry.’⁴¹ Henceforth, despite being at a disadvantage, relative power of ‘the one’ is superior to that of the alliance of ‘the many’. Because when members of ‘the many’ do not give their consent to their alliance due to the trick of ‘the one’, the alliance loses its power as a political settlement. Simply put, the conception of power as men’s consent towards a political settlement is ubiquitously applicable to various scenarios in Machiavelli’s works.

Machiavelli’s Human Nature Realism

Despite being repetitively credited as the inventor of international realism, Machiavelli is quite under-studied by international relations. According to Marco Cesa, ‘Machiavelli has, by and large, been neglected by contemporary studies of international relations ... once such a lip service has been paid, one moves on.’⁴² Furthermore, scholars like Michael Jackson and Thomas Moore even think that Machiavelli has little relevance to modern IR theory.⁴³ They regard Machiavelli as a highly contextual writer whose works on inter-state politics are circumscribed by the 16th century, pre-Westphalia context.⁴⁴ His ‘theory’ are but some identical thoughts on inter-state politics scattered across works instead of a consistent theorem dedicated to diplomacy.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, there is no sole definition of theory. If we consider trends and regularities explained in rational terms as theory, then Machiavelli’s scattered thoughts do constitute one. Moreover, according to Tarcov,

⁴⁰ D 3.11.2

⁴¹ D 3.11.2.

⁴² Marco Cesa, *Machiavelli on International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),1.

⁴³ Michael Jackson and Thomas Moore, ‘Machiavelli’s walls: The legacy of realism in international relations theory’, *International Politics* 53 No. 4 (2016): 447.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 449.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 454.

Machiavelli's works contain 'both timeless and timely elements' and the timeless part can be learnt by our age.⁴⁶

As we read the trends and regularities in Machiavelli's works carefully, one of the 'timeless elements', a coherent realist theory of international relations built on the everlasting, static human nature in Machiavelli's conception, emerges. Machiavelli assumes the international environment as state-centric, security-oriented and interactive. Within this inter-state environment, Machiavelli's first assumption about human nature, that men exhibit selfish desires, led states in Machiavelli's works to have two passions. One is ambition: states desire to acquire power via dominating other states. The other is fear, states fear being dominated by other states and therefore falling prey of their desires. Out of these two passions, states engage in balance of power politics: they manage to increase their own power at the expense of others' security. In order to fulfill this aim, states in Machiavelli's works mainly display four patterns of behavior – deception, arms building and alliance and expansion. And, again, for Machiavelli, the essence of power is men's consent to be ruled by the political authority over them that is made out of their free will.

Inter-State Environment

Machiavelli's human nature realism on international politics starts with three assumptions about inter-state society. The first and foremost is a state centric view of international politics, that is, the main actors in inter-state relations are states, namely, principalities and republics. The second is security as the ultimate goal of foreign policies.

⁴⁶ Nathan Tarcov, 'Quentin Skinner's method and Machiavelli's Prince', in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* ed. James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 195.

The third is that state behaviors are profoundly interactive as they are deeply shaped by external environment.

The first assumption made by Machiavelli is that the main actors in inter-state relations are states, namely, principalities and republics. In Chapter II of *The Prince*, ‘All states, all dominions that have held and do hold empire over men have been and are either republics or principalities. The principalities are either hereditary ... or they are new ... or they are like members added to the hereditary state of the prince who acquires them.’⁴⁷ In other words, there are two primary kinds of actors: republics and principalities. And all these actors are states, who are essentially political orders characterized by domination over men. The only exception, ecclesiastical principalities, is outlined later in Chapter XI. This kind of actor subsist by ‘superior cause’ so are ‘not to be discussed’.⁴⁸ However, when they engage in ‘temporal affairs’, they have to ‘come to greatness’ in ways adopted by the primary two kinds of actors.⁴⁹ In this way, republics and principalities as states are the major actors in Machiavelli’s conception of inter-state environment.

The second assumption is that republics and principalities engage in inter-state politics with the underlying purpose of preserving their security. As Marco Cesa argues, all states in Machiavelli’s works, be it principality and republics, are equally sensitive to security considerations.⁵⁰ This assumption of Machiavelli is well rendered by his discussion over an episode of Roman history in *Discourses on Livy*. In a war between the Romans and the Samnites, the Roman army was besieged by the Samnites. The Samnites proposed to put the Romans under yoke and send them back to Rome disarmed. Such ignominious offer inflamed

⁴⁷ Prince 1.5.

⁴⁸ Prince 6.45.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cesa, *Machiavelli on International Relations*, 15.

unrest amongst the Roman Senators, who consider it too much a shame to be accepted. Nonetheless, a wise Roman legate, Lucius Lentulus said, ‘it did not appear to him that any policy whatever for saving the fatherland was to be avoided; for since the life of Rome consisted in the life of that army, it appeared to him it was to be saved in every mode, and that the fatherland is well defended in whatever mode one defends it whether with ignominy or with glory.’ And, regarding this prudent view of Lentulus, Machiavelli draws the lesson, ‘where one deliberates entirely on the safety of his fatherland, there ought not to enter any consideration of either just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious.’⁵¹ Therefore, for Machiavelli, despite insatiable desires for power rooted in human nature, the fundamental goal of a state’s foreign policy is the preservation of its own security.

Lastly, Machiavelli views state behaviors as profoundly interactive. State behaviors are deeply shaped by other states’ behaviors. In *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli alleges that ‘it is impossible for a republic to succeed in staying quiet and enjoying its freedom and little borders’.⁵² Because, even if ‘it will not molest others, it will be molested, and from being molested will arise the wish and the necessity to acquire.’⁵³ That is, a state cannot manage to stay isolated as it can never escape inter-state interactions. Machiavelli also reveals this assumption when he views attacking a disunited city as a wrong move. There was great disunion in Rome so the Veientes and Etruscans attempted to attack Rome. However, as soon as they approach, the Romans quickly became united and valorous. They encountered the Veientes and Etruscans, ‘fight, broke them and won.’⁵⁴ Therefore, a state’s behaviors cannot be neatly decided by itself alone, it is always a response to other state’s behaviors to a certain

⁵¹ D 3.41.1.

⁵² D 2.19.1.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ D 2.25.1.

degree. A republic may intend to stay quiet or stay disunited, but it must get united and fight when molested by other states.

Fear and Ambition

Within this inter-state environment as delineated above, the first assumption about human nature, for men desire for their own good at the expense of others, leads states to generate two kinds of passions. One is ambition, republics and principalities vehemently intend to pursue their desires of dominating others at the expense of others' security. The other is fear, republics and principalities also avoid falling into the prey to their peers and letting their own desires undermine their security. These two passions were viewed as the fundamental causes of state behaviors in *Discourses on Livy*. In *Discourses*, Machiavelli thinks republics who last long need to 'settle it in a strong place of such power that nobody would believe he could crush it at once' and 'not be so great as to be formidable to its neighbors.'⁵⁵ For 'war is made on a republic for two causes: one to become master of it; the other, for fear lest it seize you'.⁵⁶ In other words, war is made either out of ambition to dominate or fear of being dominated. And peace is underpinned by the alleviation of ambition and fear with 'strong place' or 'not be so great'.

However, when ambition clashes with fear, fear will always be the dominant passion. Because, as argued above, it is security, instead of gaining domination, that serves as the ultimate goal of state behaviors in Machiavelli's inter-state system. For example, in *Florentine Histories*, Florence attempted to invade a neighboring city, Lucca, for it hosted the enemy of Florence, Niccolo Piccinino, a commander of the Duke of Milan. As the

⁵⁵ D 1.6.4

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Florentines were approaching, an ‘older and wiser’ Lucchese addressed his fellow citizens and said that Florence waged war on Lucca not because Lucca hosted the enemy of Florence.⁵⁷ Instead, it was Lucca’s weakness and the ambition of Florence. ‘One gives them hope of being able to oppress you, and the other drives them to do it’.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Florence feared that Lucca’s ally, Duke of Milan, will come to Lucca’s aid. At that time, Florence faced a dilemma: either quench its ambition over Lucca by concentrating all its force on Lucca, or quench its fear for the Duke by sending a very capable commander, Count Francesco, to Lombardy to hold the Duke in check and prevent him from coming to Lucca’s aid.⁵⁹ Encountering this hard choice between ambition and fear, Florence finally chose the latter. ‘Fear won out and they sent the count to Lombardy.’⁶⁰ Simply put, men desire for their own good at the expense of others’, which makes state behaviors dominated by ambition and fear. But, between these two dominant passions, states tend to choose fear when the two come into conflict due to the importance of security.

Balance of Power

Dominated by ambition and fear, states engage with each other in balance of power politics. On the one hand, states alleviate their fear via preserving their security by preventing other states from becoming powerful and constituting threats to them. On the other hand, states quench their ambition through gaining more relative power vis-à-vis other states. In other words, balance of power dictates states to strive to gain more power than other states under the premise that they can protect their own security. As Machiavelli points out in *The*

⁵⁷ Niccolo Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), Book 5, Chapter 11. Henceforth referred to as F, with numbers indicating book and chapter.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ F 5.12.

⁶⁰ Ibid

Prince, the conqueror of a foreign province should make himself ‘defender of neighboring lesser powers’, ‘weaken the powerful’ power and ‘prevent a powerful foreigner from entering this province’.⁶¹ Thus, this conqueror’s relative power is made the strongest in this province. And one must not concede power to another, as ‘whoever is the cause of someone’s becoming powerful is ruined.’⁶²

In order to gain power and to prevent other states from gaining power, states resort to four patterns of behaviors - deception, arms building, alliance and expansion – in Machiavelli’s works. The first pattern of behavior is deception. In *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli found that sovereigns gain power and undermine others’ power via the use of deception. When Duke of Milan became master of all Lombardy, he made an accord with the Florentines. Then the Duke started to violate the peace, but most Florentines were still holding the fantasy that ‘a friend should not be suspected lightly.’⁶³ And Florence was not ready for war until the Duke sent troops to Forli and posed serious threats to Florence. Also, in *Discourses on Livy*, Rome used great deception to gain relative power by ‘making partners, for under this name it made them servile, as were the Latins and other peoples round about’.⁶⁴ Rome deceived nearby cities like the Latins into being its ‘partner’ and let them go out of Italy to reduce other kingdoms into Roman provinces.⁶⁵ Finally, these neighbors ‘found themselves in a stroke encircled by Roman subjects and crushed by a very big city, such as Rome ... when they perceived the deception ... they were not in time to remedy it’ and therefore turned from ‘partners’ to Roman subjects.⁶⁶ In this way, by using deception, both Rome and the Duke of Milan gained power at the expense of their neighbors.

⁶¹ P 3.11.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ F 4.3-4.

⁶⁴ D 2.4.1.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The second pattern of behavior is arms building. As argued before, military force is essential for underwriting a state's political power.⁶⁷ In Chapter XIV of *The Prince*, Machiavelli alleges that 'a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but the art of war and its orders and discipline'.⁶⁸ In order to master the art of war and build up a capable armed force, both 'deeds and mind' are required.⁶⁹ Not only do a sovereign need to go hunting and get accustomed with the geography of his country, he also needs to read histories and imitate the actions of excellent men. And both republics and principalities are advised to arm their own citizens to defend themselves and conduct expansions.

The third pattern of behavior is alliance. Alliance is a common tactic used by states to hold other states in check and prevent them from becoming too powerful. In *Discourses on Livy*, Rome induced nearby cities like the Latins into being its 'partner' and let them go out of Italy to reduce other kingdoms into Roman provinces. In *Florentine Histories*, the pope and Venetians leagued with Genoese, Sienes and others against the alliance of the Florentines, King Ferdinand of Naples and the Duke of Calabria.⁷⁰ But alliance has the weakness of being subjected to deception. As the Romans allied its neighbors with deception and the alliances between Italian powers – Naples, Florence, Milan, Venice and the Papacy – were volatile and full of treasons. On this weakness of alliance, Machiavelli confessed, 'force and necessity, not written documents and obligations, make princes keep faith.'⁷¹

The fourth pattern of behavior is expansion. For Machiavelli, both ancient and his contemporary states engage in expansion to gain power. In *Discourses on Livy*, the ancients expand in various mode. The ancient Tuscans formed a league of several republics, the

⁶⁷ P 6.24.

⁶⁸ P 14.58.

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ F 8.22-26.

⁷¹ F 8.22

Spartans and Athenians conquer people and made them subjects, the Romans expand via deception.⁷² So do Machiavelli's contemporaries. As the Florentines repetitively attempted to subjugate the neighboring cities, such as Lucca and Volterra. And Machiavelli confesses, 'the intention of whoever makes war through choice, or in truth ambition, is to acquire and maintain the acquisition ... so that it enriches ... the country.'⁷³ However, Machiavelli is on caution against the problem of imperial overstretch faced by the Romans. According to Benner, if a state cannot establish and maintain a virtuous order over the territories it acquired, it cannot sustain its empire over them. As shown in a prudent caveat in *Discourses on Livy*, 'whoever acquires empire and not forces will be fittingly ruined ... he spends more than he obtains from his acquisitions'.⁷⁴

Machiavelli's Ethics

Though conventionally held as the 'teacher of evil' by the scant IR literature on Machiavelli, various readings of Machiavelli in the literature of political philosophy - especially those by Isaiah Berlin, Harvey Mansfield and Erica Benner - heavily discuss the role of virtue in Machiavellian political realism.⁷⁵ And a close IR reading of Machiavelli's works would also suggest that he is in fact a highly ethical political thinker with distinctive moral concerns.

Machiavelli's ethical views have two important premises. First, the notion of justice in Machiavelli's ethics is deeply consequentialist. While making ethical judgements on state behavior, the cardinal standard employed by Machiavelli is whether such behavior led to the

⁷² D 2.4.1.

⁷³ D 2.6.1

⁷⁴ D 2.19.2.

⁷⁵ Isaiah Berlin, 'A Special Supplement: The Question of Machiavelli', *The New York Review of Books*, November 4, 1971; Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*; Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 25.

common good of a state or not. Second, Machiavelli's ethics are a set of ethical standards for social groups instead of individuals. They are expected to be observed mainly by states. When individuals act according to such standards, they can hardly escape 'the infamy of vice'.

Only by understanding these two basic premises of Machiavelli's ethics can we read him as a moral realist instead of a 'teacher of evil' and therefore go on to discern his two major ethical concerns. One is the respect for people's free agency. A state has to acknowledge that the people have free will and respect their exercising of such free will, which means the people shall be allowed to willingly accept or reject a political settlement under any condition. The other is upholding the rule of law. 'Good law' is needed to impose constraints on people's free agency in order to preserve the very exercise of such free agency. That is, the rule of law must regulate people's actions in relations to other people's actions in order to protect the freedom of all members of a state as a kind of common good.

Premises of Machiavelli's Ethics

Machiavelli's ethical standards are fundamentally consequentialist. And they are for social groups, not for individuals. For him, actions are good only when they contribute to the common good, namely security and power, of a state. As Berlin points out, for Machiavelli, 'the moral ideal is the welfare of the patria'.⁷⁶ And, no matter how virtuous they are according to religious or metaphysical tenets, individual actions are unjust as long as they jeopardize a state's security and power. Because, as Mansfield discovers, for Machiavelli,

⁷⁶ Berlin, 'A Special Supplement'.

‘virtues are social without exception’ and are to be ‘understood by its(their) political effects’.⁷⁷

These two basic premises of Machiavelli’s ethics, sociality and consequentialism, are explicitly conveyed by his discussion over Roman greatness in *Discourses on Livy*. He thinks Rome achieved its greatness after it was freed from its kings, for ‘it is not the particular good (of kings) but the common good (of the city) that makes cities great,’ and even if common good executed harms some private individuals, those benefited can go ahead with it.⁷⁸ For Machiavelli, the ‘common good’ of the city state is preferred to the ‘particular good’ of individuals. Moreover, when the ‘particular good’ of individuals conflicts with the ‘common good’ of a state, it is not ‘particular good’ but a kind of evil. For he subsequently conjectures the scenario where ‘there is a virtuous tyrant’ who ‘expands his dominion.’ In this scenario, Machiavelli considers such conquest made by a tyrant is ‘of no utility to that republic’.⁷⁹ For a tyrant cannot ‘honor any of the citizens ... who are able and good’ and his conquest merely makes the subjugated cities pay tribute to himself instead of his cities.⁸⁰ That is, a tyrant in fact undermines a city-state’s security and freedom by undermining its internal order and leading it towards conquest that does not enhance state power. Therefore, these ‘virtuous’ expansions are merely ‘particular good’ of a tyrant as an individual, not ‘common good’ for his state, which make them evil deeds.

The ethics of Machiavelli are hard to discern and may be misread as evil teachings if we do not read them with those two premises, one social and the other consequentialist, in mind. Machiavelli knows this hardship well and he took great effort to overcome it from Chapter XV to XVIII in *The Prince*. In Chapter XV, he made the renown quote that, ‘it is

⁷⁷ Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, 34.

⁷⁸ D 2.2.2.

⁷⁹ D 2.2.1.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good'.⁸¹ And 'one should not care about incurring the reputation of those vices without which it is difficult to save one's state.'⁸² Hence, at first glance, Machiavelli seems to be making evil teachings instead of ethical arguments. However, in the same chapter, he also reminded his readers that, 'if one considers everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one's ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one's security and well-being.'⁸³ In this way, Machiavelli is not teaching princes 'not to be good'. So, Machiavelli is merely admonishing princes not to appear to be good, but to pursue what is genuinely good. He is not telling princes not to care about real vices, but not to care about appearance of vices. And what is genuinely good for him is judged in a social and consequentialist manner, that is, a state's 'security and well-being' as a kind of common good for the state as a social group. If a sovereign's actions appear to be evil but contribute to 'security and well-being' of his state, then they are good in Machiavelli's sense. If one's actions appear to be good but undermine such 'security and well-being' in fact, then they may be good in an individualistic or procedural sense, but evil in a social and consequentialist sense. For instance, in the following three chapters, he told princes that they 'should not care about a name for meanness',⁸⁴ they 'should not care about the infamy of cruelty',⁸⁵ and they may 'take little account of faith'.⁸⁶ Because being liberal will induce a prince to make 'lavish display', which burdens the people; being merciful cannot enable a prince to be feared by his people and his army and therefore undermines his authority; observing faith may make his 'observance turn against him' as 'all men are wicked and do

⁸¹ P 15.61.

⁸² P 15.62.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ P 16.62.

⁸⁵ P 17.65.

⁸⁶ P 18.69.

not observe faith'.⁸⁷ For Machiavelli, it may appear virtuous for men to be liberal, merciful and honest. But, when these qualities turn against the 'security or well-being' of a state, they are simply vices not appropriate for a sovereign. In contrast, although it appears evil to be mean, cruel and faithless, these qualities may sometimes enable a prince to establish his authority and therefore maintain his state. So long as the sovereign maintains his state, all these qualities that appear to be evil are indeed virtue if viewed from Machiavelli's social and consequentialist conceptions of ethics. As he says at the end of Chapter XVIII, 'so let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone.'⁸⁸

It is only when readers keep these two premises in mind, that ethics are applicable only to social groups and ethical judgements are fundamentally consequentialist, can they understand Machiavelli as an ethical thinker. And it is based on such understandings that we can go further to decipher the two major ethical standards of Machiavelli.

Machiavelli's Ethical Standards

Machiavelli's ethical standards are simple: respect for people's free agency and upholding the rule of law. However, these two standards make sense for Machiavelli not because of any abstract metaphysical or religious values. He put so much emphasis on these two ethical tenets because they fit into his socio-consequentialist ethical system. In other words, he proposes these two ethical standards repetitively because they are condign for states and observance of them enhances a state's security and power.

The first major ethical standard of Machiavelli is the respect for people's free agency.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ P 18.71.

For Machiavelli, a state should respect the people's innate capacity to use their free will to accept or reject a given political settlement. Because doing so is necessary for a state's common good, especially security. Instead of fortress or arms, Machiavelli considers respect for people's free will to accept or reject authority as the most robust guarantee of a state's security, both externally and internally. In Chapter XX of *The Prince*, Machiavelli dissuades princes from disarming their subjects. For 'when you disarm your subjects, you offend them' by showing that you 'distrust them either for cowardice or for lack of faith, both generate hatred.'⁸⁹ In other words, when a prince disarms his people, he does not respect their capacity to take up arms to defend or reject his authority and therefore makes himself hated. And, if he is hated, he has to turn to mercenary military to defend his state, which is always deleterious to state's security in Machiavelli's works. Moreover, respect for free agency not only protects a state from foreign threats, it also protects a state from internal threats. In Chapter XIX, Machiavelli considers 'the most powerful remedy against conspiracies is not to be hated by the people generally.'⁹⁰ For 'whoever conspires always believes he will satisfy the people with the death of the prince, but when he believes he will offend them, he does not get up the spirit to adopt such a course.'⁹¹ And, in order for a prince to be not hated by the people, he must refrain from becoming 'rapacious and a usurper of the property and the women of his subjects'.⁹² That is, he has to respect his people's capability in rejecting his authority over their belongings. Similarly, in *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli considers the people as the guardian of Rome's security. For the great individuals possesses significant prestige, which raises their ambition to usurp authority and undermine the Roman republic by putting it under tyranny or oligarchy. In contrast, the people desire but their own freedom, they 'only desire

⁸⁹ P 20.83.

⁹⁰ P 19.73.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² P 19.72.

not to be dominated' instead of managing to dominate others.⁹³ In this way, Rome defended itself against conspiracies of its greats by creating a tribunate out of respect for the people's free agency.⁹⁴ In a word, respect for people's free agency serves as a cardinal ethical tenet of Machiavelli in that it serves the common good of a state as a political settlement.

The second key ethical standard of Machiavelli is to uphold the rule of law. For him, a state has to establish prudent orders to regulate people's innate free agency that allows them to accept or reject authority, which underpins the common good of a state. Respecting the ethical tenet discussed above, constraints imposed on people by this order have to be authorized by the people out of their free will. But these freely authorized constraints have to regulate people's free agency in relation to their fellow citizens' free agency. Otherwise, as argued by Benner, mere respect for such free agency will simply lead to license that undermines this very security and power, both internal and external.⁹⁵ In *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli alleges that, 'a republic will never be perfect unless it has provided for everything with its laws and has established a remedy for every accident and given the mode to govern it.'⁹⁶ If we here understand a republic as a political settlement authorized by the people, then, this state cannot preserve its own security without law. For instance, when the Roman people authorized certain citizens of Rome to assume the position of dictator under foreign threats, Machiavelli thinks law must be placed to prevent such authorized dictatorship from eclipsing into tyranny. So, Machiavelli argues, as long as 'the dictator was appointed according to public orders, and not by his own authority, he always did good to the city'.⁹⁷ For, within the legal order, this dictator 'could not do anything that might diminish the state' as the law guarantees 'the brief time of his dictatorship and the limited authorities he had.'⁹⁸

⁹³ D 1.5.1

⁹⁴ D 1.5.2.

⁹⁵ Benner, *Machiavelli's Prince*, 413.

⁹⁶ D 1.34.3.

⁹⁷ D 1.34.1.

⁹⁸ D 1.34.2.

Without such law, even if this dictator saved Rome from foreign threats, he will become a tyrant and undermine the internal security via preying on his fellow citizen's free agency. Since this dictatorship was initially authorized by the Roman people, it is noticeable that, it was the unregulated respect for people's free agency that may lead to tyranny. Therefore, the rule of law for Machiavelli is essential for preventing the mere respect for people's free agency from leading towards internal insecurity and become a sort of evil according to his socio-consequentialist standards.

Ethics in Machiavelli's Realism

Machiavelli's conception of power as consisting of not only force and wealth but also the innate free agency within human nature invites his ethics to play crucial roles in his realist theory of international politics. For Machiavelli, his ethics play three important roles in his international realism. First, acting according to this set of ethics directly enhances a state's relative power position by providing state with good arms and reliable alliance. Second, observing the socio-consequentialist ethical system allow states to choose the right system of domestic politics that is more condign for a state's security and expansionist campaigns in the international environment. Third, following these set of ethics makes states respect and understand the nature of power better and therefore choose the wise policies. In this way, just like sinews in muscles, Machiavelli's ethics not only underpin a state's relative power but also allow a state to wield its power more prudently and effectively.

Good Arms and Reliable Allies

Observing Machiavelli's ethics directly enhances a state's power in two ways. On the one hand, the rule of law enables a state to build stronger armies to underwrite their security. On the other hand, respect for one's allies' free agency enhances alliance.

For Machiavelli, 'good law' is the foundation of 'good arms'. In *The Prince*, he argues that 'it is necessary for a prince to have good foundations for himself – good laws and good arms.'⁹⁹ And 'good arms' essentially means 'one's own arm'.¹⁰⁰ For others' arms, mercenary and auxiliary ones, are either useless or perilous. 'If mercenary captains are excellent men, you cannot trust them ... if he is not virtuous, he ruins you the ordinary way'.¹⁰¹ Regarding a state employing auxiliary arms, 'arms of a power that is called to come with its arms to help', its 'ruin is accomplished'.¹⁰² Such peril of other's arms was vividly illustrated by a war between Florence and Volterra in *Florentine Histories*. In order to counter the Florentines, Volterrans hired 1000 men to defend them, but these soldiers, 'seeing the mighty siege the Florentines were laying down and losing confidence that they could defend it, were slow in defense and very prompt in the injuries they inflicted every day on the Volterrans.'¹⁰³

Therefore, for principalities, 'a wise prince ... preferred to lose with his own than to win with others'.¹⁰⁴ And a republic has to 'send its citizens' for arms.¹⁰⁵ In order to build up 'one's own arm', a state must establish 'good law'. As Machiavelli confesses in *Discourses on Livy*, 'although it was said another time that the foundation of all states is a good military, and that where this does not exist there can be neither good laws nor any other good thing, it does not appear to me superfluous to repeat it.'¹⁰⁶ Because 'one does not always remain at

⁹⁹ P 12.48.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ P 12.49.

¹⁰² P 13.55.

¹⁰³ F 7.30

¹⁰⁴ P 13.55.

¹⁰⁵ P 12.49.

¹⁰⁶ D 3.31.4.

war, nor can one remain at it; so one must be able to train in time of peace, and with others than subjects one cannot do this training out of regard for the expenses'.¹⁰⁷ In this way, good law provides the basis for one's own good arms by providing an order that enables decent trainings in the peace time. So, Machiavelli's tenet, upholding the rule of law, has not only ethical but also practical meaning. As ascribing to this ethical tenet enhances a state's military power.

Machiavelli also considers the respect for people's free agency as an enhancement of alliance. In *Discourses on Livy*, a Roman senator advised the Romans not to observe the accord they were coerced to make with the Samnites. For Machiavelli, it is because 'it is not shameful not to observe the promises that you have been made to promise by force; and when the force is lacking, forced promises that regard the public will always be broken and it will be without shame for whoever breaks them.'¹⁰⁸ In other words, in Machiavelli's inter-state environment, alliances are prone to deception not just due to a lack of faith; the deeper reason is a lack of respect for people's free agency. States defect from alliances or accords not because of sheer dishonesty, they defect and justify such defections because these agreements are not made by their free agency.

In contrast, Machiavelli regards accords made out of free agency as deserving to be adhered to faithfully. In Chapter XXI of *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises princes to be 'a true friend and a true enemy ... without any hesitation he discloses himself in support of someone against another.'¹⁰⁹ Because, if your side wins, the winner 'has an obligation to you'.¹¹⁰ If your side loses, you are 'given refuge' by your ally.¹¹¹ That is, the alliance deserves fidelity 'without any hesitation' must be a 'true' one. Furthermore, Machiavelli also admonished

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ D 3.42.2.

¹⁰⁹ P 21.89.

¹¹⁰ P 21.90.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

princes ‘never to associate with someone more powerful than himself’ in order to attack others.¹¹² Because, when the more powerful ally wins, he will direct his ambition towards you and your lesser relative power will undermine your security, in this case, ‘you are left his prisoner’.¹¹³ If so, the state towards whom Machiavelli advises princes to be ‘a true friend and a true enemy’ must be one equally powerful or less powerful. In other words, Machiavelli is advising princes to keep good faith with allies who have not the capacity to force accord on him, but to stay clear from accords with states who have such capability. Therefore, for Machiavelli, alliances in which allies’ free agencies are more likely to be respected are the ones who deserve to be observed with good faith. In contrast, if an alliance contains the possibility of being enforced by brute force without respecting the ally’s innate free agency, it should be avoided. Hence, observing respect for people’s free agency as an ethical tenet leads states in Machiavelli’s world to choose the right alliance and doing so enhances such alliances in practice. In this way, a virtuous state may cement the relative power of its side vis-à-vis its enemies.

Domestic Political System

Machiavelli considers the observance of his two ethical tenets as the founding stone of a domestic political system that well protects a state’s security in the highly interactive and volatile international environment. Moreover, such a political system is more disposed to conduct expansion.

In *Discourses on Livy*, the Roman domestic order was extolled by Machiavelli as it was in sync with his conception of ethics. For the Roman order was one built on the respect

¹¹² P 21.90.

¹¹³ Ibid.

for free agency and the rule of law. Rome was initially led by kings, but when the kings were expelled, the great of Rome created the consul and the senate, who came to assume the kingly authority via a mode ‘mixed of principality and aristocrats.’¹¹⁴ Later, the consul and senate became insolent, the people rose up against them, which led Rome to create tribunes of plebs.¹¹⁵ In this way, Rome respected its people’s free agency via expelling the king and allowing the people to express the tumults amongst them that go against the great. And Rome prevented such respect for freedom from eclipsing into license with the rule of law, which was realized via the creation of the consul, the senate and the tribunes.

This order based on respect for free agency and the rule of law the Roman order allows Rome to adapt better to the complexity of international environment. Machiavelli considers the Roman mode for dictatorship as deserving to be considered among those that were ‘the cause of the greatness of Rome.’ For ‘the customary orders in republics have a slow motion ... their remedies are very dangerous when they have to remedy a thing that time does not wait for.’¹¹⁶ When Rome was facing the hostility of her neighbors combined, it created a dictator to handle such a crisis. Meanwhile, because the Roman dictatorship was ‘appointed according to public orders’, it will not lead to tyranny that undermines the common good of Rome. Hence, the rule of law allows the Roman domestic political system to be flexible in defending Roman security.

Moreover, this order prepares Rome better for expansion. Machiavelli alleges that, to make ‘a republic that wishes to make an empire ... it is necessary to do everything as did Rome.’¹¹⁷ He observes that, in contrast to other republics like Sparta or Venice, Rome allowed domestic tumults, employed people in war and opened the way for foreigners. So,

¹¹⁴ D 1.2.3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ D 1.34.3.

¹¹⁷ D 1.4.

Rome made its people ‘numerous and armed so as to be able to make a great empire.’¹¹⁸ In this way, Rome’s respect for the people’s free agency – their freedom to express dissension, to be armed and to immigrate to Rome – makes the Roman order more condign for expansion in inter-state politics.

Respect for Power

Machiavelli considers observing the socio-consequentialist ethics allow states to understand and respect the nature of power better and choose more prudent strategies while engaging in the balance of power politics. Otherwise, they can hardly develop a sensible grasp of the nature of power and therefore make prudent decisions to further their power and security in the inter-state environment.

For Machiavelli, respecting men’s free agency allow states to act more prudently while they are deciding over expansion. Because, apart from understanding power as essentially the exercise of men’s free agency, states also need to respect the very human nature such power is based upon. Since ‘victories are never so clear that the winner does not have to have some respect, especially for justice,’ expansion cannot bring a state power unless the victor’s authority is willingly accepted by the people he subjugated.¹¹⁹ And states who do not respect power will burden themselves without gaining power even if they are victorious in expansion. For instance, in *Florentine Histories*, the Florentines were excited and eager to seize Lucca when Niccolo Fortebraccio, a man served Florence for a long time, seized Volterra, a city near Lucca. A prominent supporter of this expansion, Messer Rinaldo, argued that Lucca was weak and an easy prey for it was living under tyranny. ‘Lucca, since it

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ P 6. 44.

was slave to one of its citizens and had lost that natural vigor and ancient zeal to defend its own freedom, so that it would be given up either by the people to chase out the tyrant or by the tyrant out of fear of the people'.¹²⁰ Rinaldo clearly understood power as men's exercise of free will and a tyrant has no power as his authority is not authorized by free men. However, he did not ascribe to Machiavelli's ethics, for he did not see the free agency within human nature that underpins such power. This ignorance led his advice to be viewed as imprudent by another Florentine, Niccolo da Uzzano. Who, according to Benner, was designed by Machiavelli as a wise and prudent voice in *Florentine Histories*.¹²¹ Uzzano saw the attack on Lucca as a perilous task. By doing so, instead of seizing Lucca, Florence 'would free it from a tyrant; and out of a friendly city, subdued and weak, they would make a free city, hostile to them and in time an obstruction to the greatness of their republic.'¹²² Therefore, even if Florence can seize Lucca as Rinaldo expected, Florence cannot gain power from the conquest. For even if the tyranny in Lucca is toppled, the power of Lucchese people still need to be respected by the Florentines, otherwise the Florentines will gain no power from Lucca in the same way the Lucchese tyrant did not. Instead of power, such conquest will only bring 'expenses that it would incur' on a Florence 'wearied by a long and grave war.'¹²³ And such prudence uttered by Uzzano requires not only an understanding of power as exercise of free agency, it also requires the ethical respect for the free will rooted in human nature, which is the basis of such power.

Furthermore, upholding the rule of law, especially the law amongst states, is also important for states to make prudent decisions for the sake of their security and power in inter-state relations. As Steven Forde finds out, unlike contemporary realism, Machiavelli

¹²⁰ D 4.19.

¹²¹ Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 340.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ D 4.19.

does not strictly view inter-state environment as anarchical, where law is always subordinate to force.¹²⁴ For Machiavelli, law is simply a set of constraints authorized by free agents. Hence, as Fischer argues, Machiavelli's realism allows the possibility of the rule of law amongst states. And, for Machiavelli, upholding the rule of law amongst nations induces states to make more sensible and prudent decisions. For instance, in *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli described the episode that the Romans sent three Fabii men as spokesmen to the French who came to assault Tuscany and Chiusi. When the French and Tuscans came to fight, these Fabii spokesmen put them amongst the Tuscans to combat the French, which violated the law between states that forbid spokesmen from participating in combats. But the Romans did not punish their ambassadors, instead, the Fabiis were made tribunes. This violation of the rule of law by the Roman side angered the French, who attacked Rome and almost obliterated Rome's defense. On this setback of Rome, Machiavelli comments, 'the ruin arose for the Romans only through the inobservance of justice, for when their ambassadors sinned "against the law of nations" and should have been punished, they were honored.' Therefore, Rome undermined its own security in this episode due to their imprudent decision to honor the Fabiis. And this err is not criticized by Machiavelli as a failure in arms or tactics, but a failure to observe his ethical standard that prescribe states to uphold the rule of law, both domestic and foreign. Simply put, it is the non-observance of ethics that led the Romans to make the wrong decision that goes against their security.

Conclusion

¹²⁴ Steven Forde, 'Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli', *The Journal of Politics* 54 No. 2 (May 1992): 381.

In conclusion, Machiavelli considers two ethical principles, respect to free agency and the rule of law, as enhancement of state power in balance-of-power politics.

Human beings have two immutable natures for Machiavelli. First, humans have various desires that always go against other humans' desires. Second, humans are forever capable of aspiring for freedom no matter how impoverished they are. Based on this understanding of human nature, Machiavelli views men's consent to accept authority over them out of free will as a constitutive part of state power. Therefore, in order to gain power as consent and to enhance a state's position in inter-state politics, a wise state should respect men's desire for freedom. Meanwhile, for the purpose of respect men's freedom without letting their desires freedom hurting each other's similar desires, rule of law is essential to prevent the respect for freedom from becoming degeneration into license. In a state-centric, security-oriented and interactive inter-state environment, observing these two ethical standards enables states to build good arms, win reliable alliances, establish condign domestic institutions and making prudent decisions. These virtuous deeds allow states to guarantee their security and further their desire for power based on human nature when they engage in balance-of-power politics. In this way, ethical concerns play into Machiavelli's balance of power politics as sinews of political power in the inter-state realm.

Implications

The key insight this research offers to contemporary international realism is that, contrary to most 20th century realist theories, international realism is not essentially at odds with ethics as long as it has a sound understanding of human nature and political power. The current mainstream international realism, neorealism, considers power as but 'solid material assets', especially military force and the economic potential of a country that

undergirds such force. In Machiavelli's view, such understanding of power is an inadequate one.¹²⁵ Power considered in this way ignores the other facet of power, power as men's consent to political settlement based on their free will, which support military force and economic power. Such ignorance has no respect to the reality of human nature and the nature of power, but only emphasis on structural forces such as geography or economy. In this way, neo-realism leaves no space for non-structural forces such as ethics, which alienates power from moral concerns. Meanwhile, 20th century human nature realism also fails to address political ethics as its conception of human nature is inadequate. For instance, Hans Morgenthau understands the 'will to power' and 'a limitless lust for power' in human nature, but he does not acknowledge the universal capability to accept or reject political authority as the other side of human nature.¹²⁶ In this way, 20th century human nature discovers the evil quality in men without acknowledging men's potential for virtuous deeds, which led to its impetuous verdict that 'moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states'.¹²⁷ These drawbacks disable 20th century realism from offering sound explanations to ethical questions in international society and left such topic entirely to neo-liberal institutionalism or social constructivism.

If the relationship between morality and power politics is still of interest to realists of our time, this research suggests a re-engagement with the classics in realism's rich tradition as a possible way in which contemporary realism can incorporate ethical concerns for three reasons. First, classics in political realism shed light on human nature and political power. As Machiavelli discovers, men 'are unable to oppose that to which nature inclines us.'¹²⁸ For thousands of years, as Machiavelli discovers, human nature is forever static. Meanwhile, as

¹²⁵ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 36.

¹²⁶ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1984), 7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²⁸ D 3.9.3.

long as politics is about the relationship between human beings, there is always an undeniable link between human nature and political power. These immutable but fundamental realities deem that the ancient knowledge of politics are always applicable and of use to the international society of our age. And such knowledge is quintessential for any realist quest for justice amongst nations of our time. Second, the international society in the classics remind scholars of our age of a reality more complex than we assume. In the Machiavelli case, his works remind us that men are not simply evil and ravenous, they also have free agency; power is not just mighty arms, it also involves consent. As Maurizio Viroli argues, the most distinctive point of Machiavelli's realism is the awareness that political reality is complex, which cannot be grasped by empirical scientists alone but requires deep understanding of history and humanity.¹²⁹ In this way, the classics may direct contemporary realism to jump out of the narrow perspective of modern empiricism and to look into the more complex reality consisting of history and humanity, wherein ethics is a significant topic to be addressed. Finally, classic political theory can provide modern realism with its lost foundation – a distinctive ethical system that is consequentialist and dedicated to social groups. As Jack Donnelly observes, the realist doctrines such as *raison d'état* are not rejection of morality, but ethical arguments overlooked by realists who are making them.¹³⁰ And a re-engagement with the fore-runners of realism, such as Machiavelli, may direct realism of our day to discover the hidden socio-consequentialist ethics hidden behind seemingly amoral realist arguments.

In a word, this article implies that a return to realism's rich tradition will allow contemporary realism to develop its own ethical arguments and engender constructive

¹²⁹ Maurizio Viroli, *Redeeming The Prince: The Meaning of Machiavelli's Masterpiece* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 90.

¹³⁰ Jack Donnelly, 'The Ethics of Realism', in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* ed. Christia Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 155.

response to ethical questions in international relations. This return to classics will not only shed great light on inter-state relations of the 21st century but also better the development of this time-honored genre of realism.

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