

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 Aug 2026
Revised 21 Sept 2026
Accepted 23 Sept 2026
Published 24 Sept 2026

KEYWORDS

Politics
Morality
Political Morality
Moral Politics
Machiavelli's Virtù
Fortuna

FUNDING

This research received no external funding.

LICENCE

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A Critical Examination of Virtù and Fortuna: Towards the Understanding of the Politics-Morality Paradox in Machiavelli's Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Machiavelli's political theory is riddled with controversy and understood differently by scholars. His ideas on *virtù* and *fortuna* in politics are central to the controversy surrounding Machiavelli's political tenets. A comparative analysis of Machiavelli's *virtù* and *fortuna* clearly reveals the tension and/or paradox between the two concepts. This also leads to another serious paradox discoverable in Machiavelli's political doctrine: the politics-morality paradox – that political morality, history has shown, often precedes moral politics. Despite Machiavelli's position that morality is not subservient to any universal code, which stems from the fact that politics is always in a state of flux, this research equally deduced (from Machiavelli's doctrine) the subtle relationship between politics and morality as construed by scholars like Hilla Zmora: the puzzle that political morality often lays the foundation for moral politics. Consequently, in the task of laying a solid political foundation on which moral existence can repose, it is even immoral to be moral.

HOW TO CITE:

Okpata, B. C. (2026). A critical examination of *virtù* and *fortuna*: towards the understanding of the politics-morality Paradox in Machiavelli's philosophy. *The Polis: Journal of Political Studies*, 4 (1), 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.68251/polis.v4i1.3>

Introduction

Morality in Machiavelli's political philosophy has long generated debate. While some consider Machiavelli a civic visionary, others regard him as an embodiment of political treachery. After over four hundred years of discourse on Machiavelli's concept of political power, controversies and disagreements among scholars persist. Little wonder, Strauss opined that Machiavelli is "...the teacher of many men in all countries. The substance of his thought is not Florentine, or even Italian, but universal. It concerns, and it is meant to concern, all thinking men regardless of time and place."¹ However, this research concentrates on concepts of *virtù* and *fortuna* in the light of Machiavelli, which serve as a prelude towards the understanding of the politics-morality paradox which emanates from Machiavelli's political theory. This research therefore centres on the following tensions: Why must a virtuous prince sometimes rely on chance or luck (fortune) to succeed? Again, why is it that the moral existence of a society can be secured only by political foundations whose creation requires the very means like force, cruelty and deceit which undermine common or conventional morality? The work further exposes the virtue-fortune irony as pointed out by Machiavelli, and the tragic necessity that exists between politics and morality: that *political morality* lays the foundation for *moral politics*. It is pertinent to underscore that the paper does not intend to discuss *politics-morality paradox* in a strict logical

sense; rather, it restricts itself to the mentioned tragic relationship between politics and morality.

***Virtu* and *Fortuna* in Machiavelli's Thought**

A critical examination of what Machiavelli meant by *virtu* (and *fortuna*) is, no doubt, of great service to understanding the politics-morality paradox in Machiavelli's theory. One of the reasons for this is that Machiavelli's view on the *virtu* of the prince has been widely misunderstood: "indeed, those who argue for the immoral nature of Machiavelli's doctrines usually point to what he says about *virtu* as a proof."² Again, according to Sheldon Wolin, "*Machiavelli's* conception of 'civic *virtu*' marked an important stage in the development of modern political thought and practice, for it symbolized an end to the old alliance between statecraft and soul-craft."³ Virtue, a fundamental concept of Western culture, is a complex notion comprising layers of meaning that have accumulated and intermingled over many centuries. Virtue in Classical Roman thought is a synthesis of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Over time, other qualities such as magnanimity, generosity and honesty, which were considered particularly desirable in a leader, also came to be associated with the concept. Medieval Christian writers inherited the doctrine of four cardinal virtues from the ancient writers, but their assimilations into Christianity were not without significant adjustment⁴ – the Christian notion of virtue was aimed at the attainment of happiness in the *next* world. Even the ruler, despite his responsibility in *this* world, was not exempted.⁵

However, Renaissance humanists reclaimed some of *virtu's* original, Roman meaning, which reverted back to the world of man; unlike the rulers of the Medieval period, who cultivated virtue as a means of ensuring their place in heaven, rulers in the Renaissance era were advised to guarantee themselves glory on earth as well.⁶ The display of "secular" virtue by princes introduced a dimension of realism in the form of an acknowledgement that rulers could not always refrain from taking measures generally considered to be manifestations of vice. Such measures, considered deviations from the norm, should be confined to exceptional circumstances.

Despite all the intellectual changes that occurred during the Renaissance, Hillay Zmora opines, the image of the ruler cast by *virtu* remained essentially idealistic; "he was still chained to conventional morality, as binding on him as on his subjects."⁷ Machiavelli's critique of *conventional* morality (and virtue) is obvious in chapters fifteen to eighteen of *The Prince*. In the opening lines of chapter fifteen, he replaced it with *pragmatic* morality thus:

It now remains to consider what the attitude and conduct of a prince toward his subjects and friends should be... in treating this subject I depart from the rules set down by others... I deem it best to stick to the practical truth of things rather than to fancies. Many men have imagined republics and principalities that never really existed at all. Yet the way men live is far removed from the way they ought to live that anyone who abandons what is for what should be pursues his downfall rather than his preservation; for a man who strives after goodness in all his acts is sure to come to ruin, since there are so many men who are not good. Hence it is necessary that a prince who is interested in his survival learn to be other than good, making use of this capacity or refraining from it according to need.⁸

Although scholars like Zmora agree with Machiavelli's rejection of the conventional conception of virtue, Leo Strauss understood Machiavelli's "virtu" as the judicious alternation of virtue and vice according to circumstances – it is Machiavelli's new "ought" which demands the judicious and vigorous use of both virtue and vice.⁹ Also, for Neal Wood, "Machiavelli's exemplars of *virtu* were overwhelmingly drawn not from Greek but from Roman antiquity, and not from peaceful but from militaristic contexts."¹⁰ The prototypical situation for virtuosity, therefore, was in warfare; Machiavelli's man of *virtu* then becomes a warrior triumphant in circumstances of extreme danger, hardship and chance. The significance of this, according to John Geerken, is that while *virtu* is paradigmatically the mode of conduct manifested by soldiers in battle, it is nevertheless a portable quality that can be transferred to politics, which is a kind of war.

Contrarily, Hannaford argues for a model of *virtu* that is less overwhelmingly militaristic. For him, Machiavelli's "virtu" includes both military and political elements. Thus, if the Romans were men of *virtu*, it was not only because of their military prowess, but because their actions were directed toward public, political purposes, i.e., the establishment of legitimate political authority, and the maintenance of liberty and citizenship against private tyranny. It is important, he notes, that politics differs from war; that "political *virtu* is inappropriate to warfare which requires military *virtu*, just as the latter is out of context in peacetime." Similarly, Subrata Mukherjee and Sushila Ramaswamy add: "Civic *virtu* in a ruler were martial qualities needed to defend the state against external aggression and internal disunity. In an ordinary

individual it meant public-spiritedness and patriotism necessary for ensuring freedom and deterring tyranny.”¹¹

Both Wood and Hannaford, for Geerken, are largely right but also partly wrong; Hannaford is correct in seeking to reclaim a nonmilitary component of the concept, which means Wood’s emphasis on the military element was excessive. On the other hand, “to argue that the political context is entirely different from the military is to overlook the matter of structural similarity between political and military activities, a similarity that enables the man of *virtu* to transfer his virtuosity from peaceable activities to warlike ones, and vice-versa, as the circumstances warrant.”¹² The controversy prompted Russell Price to acknowledge that Machiavelli’s use of *virtu* in all his writings discloses a complex concept-cluster – one which includes traditional, Christian moral virtue, purely military *virtu*, purely political *virtu*, a combinatorial politico-military *virtu*, an instrumental virtue, and cultural virtue – as well as ancient and modern *virtu* which variously combine and modify these several elements. Moreover, Foster is of the view that Machiavelli’s *virtu* is “the sum of those qualities, whatever they may be, which tend to make a man great, powerful and famous.”¹³ For Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, Machiavelli’s *virtu* represents masculine and warlike qualities such as: courage, self-assertiveness, fortitude, ambition, vitality, intelligence, fame, and strength.¹⁴ Others like Hancock still regard Machiavelli’s *virtu* as skill, i.e., technical competence and brilliance of execution.¹⁵

It is pertinent, Geerken writes, to underscore that Machiavelli did not invent the wide range of meanings he displays in his works, nor did he change *virtu* from a moral to an amoral or immoral concept.¹⁶ What he did, according to Jerrold Seigel:

was to take the moral and nonmoral meanings of ‘virtue’ – meanings which has coexisted for centuries, though increasingly in confusion – set them clearly in opposition to each other, and developed a confrontational theory of human conduct and action which emphasized *virtu* in its nonmoral (i.e., capacitative and functional) senses, and therefore its military and political manifestations.¹⁷

In Machiavelli’s political theory, virtue is not always treated with consistency or clarity. One of the most puzzling and recurring paradoxes concerns the role of “necessity” in the formation of virtue. In contrast to virtue as the key to preserving freedom in civic life, fortune plays a central role in human affairs. “The relationship between *virtu* and dame fortune was addressed (by Machiavelli) in terms of masculine and feminine nature.”¹⁸ Fortune, according to Machiavelli, favours and befriends the brave. She is compared to a violent river that, when aroused, causes havoc by flooding the plains, tearing down trees and buildings, and destroying anything in her way. Machiavelli, therefore, advised rulers to build floodgates and embankments (in seasons of fair weather) to contain the raging river. Fortune destroys those who did not sufficiently safeguard their interests; being fickle, Fortune could be contained only by those who had the capacity to change; instead of yielding to Fortune, Machiavelli suggests, one had to act boldly and decisively; Fortune would ruin those who submitted meekly or those who did not protect or adapt themselves. Men, according to Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, conquer Fortune by acknowledging its power in order to prevent a stream from becoming a raging torrent.¹⁹ In the words of Machiavelli:

... Fortune changes and men stand fixed in their old ways, they are prosperous so long as there is congruity between them, and the reverse when there is not. Of this, however, I am well persuaded: that it is better to be impetuous than cautious. For Fortune is a woman who, to be kept under must be beaten and roughly handled; and we see that she suffers herself to be more readily mastered by those who so treat her than by those who are more timid in their approaches. And always, like a woman, she favours the young, because they are less scrupulous and fiercer, and command her with greater audacity.²⁰

According to John Bernard, many late-medieval thinkers saw no inconsistency in believing that while all our acts are governed by forces beyond our control, we are nevertheless autonomous agents, free at any given moment to choose one course of action over another. This is in harmony with Machiavelli’s view as regards the role of fortune (and virtue) in human affairs; “... if one conforms one’s conduct to the flow of events, one’s fortune will thrive ... those who suit their own actions to the times succeed, while those who don’t fail. Therefore, anyone who could ‘adapt to and understand the times ... could control the stars and the Fates.’”²¹

Although, as free agents, men can dominate fortune. Machiavelli appears to be an optimist who believes that by taking precautions, we can improve our chances of overcoming fortune. Having chided Italian princes for blaming fortune rather than their own sloth for their loss of power, he now concedes especially in chapters twenty-four and twenty-five of *The Prince* that “fortune governs half our actions”; though, “men are

sometimes unfortunate, sometimes fortunate.” In other words, individuals can “second” but not “oppose” their fortune or, more graphically, that “they may weave its warp, but cannot break it” – just as fortune can sometimes provide the occasion for men to act freely, so individuals may act in a way that gives her the opportunity to reciprocate. In short, Machiavelli exhorts us to shift with fortune’s changes – the way to be absolutely successful (especially for princes) in the contingent realm of human affairs is to be as flexible as fortune herself. Hence, a successful ruler (for Machiavelli) must have a mind ready to shift as the winds of fortune may dictate. He must adapt himself to her every whim. Unfortunately, according to Machiavelli’s “humanistic realism,” where he attempts to transcend reliance on fortune, the truth is that no one can always conform to fortune’s changes. For we always desire more than we can attain; hence the fluctuations of men’s fortunes: “anyone wise enough to adapt at all times would always have good fortune; but since such wise men do not exist, fortune controls men’s outcomes. The reason for this inevitable shortfall lies in the gap between human desires and capacities.”²²

On why men’s fortunes vary, Machiavelli speculates that it depends on their conformity with the times. All men are inclined to make the mistakes dictated by their temperaments, but the individual is more likely to thrive when circumstances match his actions. A good example is Pope Julius, who thrived in his boldness, but would have failed if circumstances had ever required him to act cautiously – as stated in chapter twenty-five of *The Prince*. In short, if you are lucky, luck will be on your side. To overcome the difficulties inherent in acquiring new territories, for instance, “one needs good luck and plenty of resolution.” In general, waging war requires good soldiers, wise generals, and good luck (i.e., virtue and fortune). According to Machiavelli, one can become a prince by strength (*virtu*) or by luck (*fortuna*) – which are illustrated respectively by Francesco Sforza and Cesare Borgia:

Whereas Sforza rose from private citizen to Duke of Milan by exercising his virtue, Duke Valentino [Cesare Borgia] gained and later lost power through the fortune of his father, the Pope. Despite his undoubted virtue, his vulnerability to fortune in the form of his father’s untimely death makes him a paradigm of the vicissitudes of luck even to one who acts virtuously.... An army that is capable of withstanding multiple attacks in a single battle can be defeated only when thwarted by luck.²³

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli shows that when fortune wants someone to rise to greatness, she gives him active enemies to overcome. For instance, in discussing the virtues of founders such as Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus (and Hiero of Syracuse), Machiavelli boasts that fortune provided them nothing but opportunity. In general, fortune finds a way to help her friends and hurt her enemies; though how men respond when fortune bestows or withdraws her favours is as varied as the bestowal or withdrawal itself. Like fortune, misfortune (Machiavelli reasons) is to be taken for granted as an inevitable, perhaps even normal, part of life. That is why fortune oftentimes awards different results under similar circumstances.

For Bernard, Machiavelli at times conceives virtue and fortune to be a single entity – a general, for example, stands to win or lose “according to his luck (*fortuna*) and to his virtue.”²⁴ In addition, where military virtue obtains, good order and “good fortune” will follow. Little wonder, in the final chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli exhorts the Medici to lend the fortune and virtue of their house to the redemption of Italy. Occasionally, though, he concedes that the two qualities don’t always go together so neatly. On another note, Machiavelli, according to Bernard, acquiesces: “...when virtue is present, it leaves little room for fortune to flourish ... the world offers men a stark choice between submitting to fortune or resisting her with their virtue.”²⁵ Also, the inability to adapt to fortune’s changes keeps men in her control.

Machiavelli unrelentingly portrays fortune’s realm as totally unresponsive to the human demand for justice. After the opening concession in one of his poems that our “virtue” may hold off “fortune’s” violence, Machiavelli portrays fortune’s realm as harsh, alien, and irrational:

More than just unpredictable, she is quintessentially irrational, trampling down the just and exalting the unjust... she arbitrarily picks winners and losers, but because she is treacherous, no one can count on remaining in her good graces. As an eagle smashes a turtle on a rock below and then dives down to feed on its flesh, so fortune raises her favorites up only to ‘hurl’ them down and enjoy their misery.²⁶

While some men enjoy success in this life, such achievement is arbitrary, wholly unconnected with merit, and readily reversible. We are fundamentally slaves to fortune’s whims, and only a timely death permits one to escape the turn of her wheel. According to Bernard, present misfortune for Machiavelli will, in time, give way to good; the important thing is to make fortune your friend by embracing misfortune.

Similarly, Mukherjee and Ramaswamy argue that Machiavelli's discussion of *fortune* and *virtu* must be understood in the context of Italian humanism²⁷ – Fortune was no longer the “inexorable force of providence,” but a “capricious power” of irrational happenstance. Through his creative power and assertiveness, man can control and shape his destiny against the flux that fortune unleashed. With this, Machiavelli set aside the Christian perception of fortune as a life force, a divine necessity with very little room for human manoeuvre and free action. Moreover, Machiavelli reiterates his belief in the possibility of changing events and bringing them under human control via a systematic and self-conscious statesmanship.²⁸

Politics-Morality Paradox in Machiavelli's Philosophy

The subject at hand takes its root from the divergent argument between scholars on “Machiavelli's Originality.” One camp belongs to Benedetto Croce who believes that “Machiavelli's originality lay in his discovery that politics is an autonomous enterprise divorced from ethics (or morality);”²⁹ the other, with Isaiah Berlin as the arrow head, has a contrary view: that Machiavelli did not differentiate between politics and ethics (or morality), but rather between two different kinds of ethics – *pre-Christian or pagan ethics*, which exalts the values of “courage, vigor, fortitude, above all the assertion of one's proper claims;” and *Christian morality*, which idealizes “charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of this world, faith in the life hereafter, belief in the salvation of the individual soul as being of incomparable value....”³⁰

Hillay Zmora even went further to assert that Machiavelli, in fact, believed morality to be a central component in political life: “Machiavelli it will be argued, understood morality and politics to be closely linked – but in a very subtle way that challenges, or even contravenes, common assumptions about their relationship.” Zmora continues:

In Machiavelli's view of the nature of man, it is a grave error to attempt to force politics to conform to the dictates of ethical theory; when politics strives to be moral, it achieves the destruction of the very conditions necessary for moral existence. In all that we do to regulate public life and provide for security and welfare in human society, it is immoral to be moral. Such is the irony of politics. The tragedy of politics, however, is that the alternative is no less dangerous. Little good can result when the art of politics forsakes morality entirely.³¹

It is a terrible paradox, according to Zmora, that the moral existence of a society can be secured only by political foundations whose creation requires the very means – such as force, cruelty and deceit – that undermine common or conventional morality. In addition, it is pertinent to note that the business of laying solid political foundations on which moral existence can repose is not a one-time task. It involves (because of human nature) unending maintenance, from which it follows that the threat to morality is as continuous as the threat to survival. Within this predicament, man has no universal, foolproof rules of conduct to guide either his political deliberations or his moral choices. Therefore, not only politics, but morality too is in a perpetual crisis, engulfed in uncertainty and constrained by necessity. Morality can only thrive where there is a reasonable level of security.³²

Machiavelli's critique of Christianity clarifies further his approach to the politics-morality relationship. It is imperative to underscore that Machiavelli's attack on Christianity does not necessarily rest on the Church's attempt to subjugate politics to morality, but on the distinction she made between the two. For Machiavelli, “the Church's distinction between politics and morality may be itself immoral – immoral because it is politically deleterious.” Again,

The Church's withdrawal from, and contempt towards, this world in the name of a pure spirituality is seen by Machiavelli as a prescription for defeat – and a central cause for the world's relative decline since antiquity. A morality that averts our gaze from the city of man and directs it upwards to the city of God, which denigrates the meaning of earthly travail, has only itself to blame when reality falls short of ideals. Morality of this sort is the problem, not the solution.³³

The above understanding that Machiavelli, on the one hand, saw Christian morality as ill-suited to this world, but did not disassociate morality from politics on the other, was pivotal to Berlin's seminal article titled: “The Originality of Machiavelli.” Here, Berlin thinks that “the claim that Machiavelli divorced ethics from politics is based on the false premise that ethics is the realm of absolute, ultimate values, whereas politics is the technical art of adapting means to ends.”³⁴ However, Zmora pinpointed Berlin's inability to

appreciate the depths of Machiavelli's originality. He is not comfortable with Berlin's view that Machiavelli does not see any of the two kinds of ethics to be intrinsically more desirable, but rather insists only that the two kinds of ethics cannot coexist – meaning that a choice must be made between them. He (Zmora) conversely asserts that Machiavelli is not satisfied with a liberal presentation of two equally good but contradictory ethics, each of which is genuine in its own right.

Again, Machiavelli is not only satisfied with the demonstration of the incompatibility of Christian ethics with the real world; he is equally engaged in a serious critique of Christianity, which he holds solely responsible for the world's maladies in his time. According to Mark Hulliung, Machiavelli's expectation was that the Christian worldview would be crushed and replaced by another. However, it is also not correct to say that Machiavelli really embraced pagan ethics of the *polis* or Greek city-state.

Summarily, "in many cases Machiavelli is every bit as critical of classical political thought as he is of Christian idealism. Indeed, he dedicates major efforts to undermining the foundations of both." In other words, Machiavelli rejected completely the belief in an idealized good, either that of the Christian faith or that of classical political philosophy, both of which provided man with a lofty ideal towards which to aspire:

From the point of view of classical philosophy, the fulfillment of human potential is possible only by means of active participation in political life; from the Christian perspective, man may gain redemption only by following in the way of Jesus, who both idealized and embodied the qualities of meekness, humility, and contempt for worldly things. Machiavelli, however, starts with the actual, not the ideal. So great is the difference between the two... contemplating the ideal is not only futile but downright suicidal.³⁵

With this argument, Mark Hulliung demolished Berlin's view that "Machiavelli was one of the Renaissance humanists, looking for a 'middle way' and trying to integrate Christianity with classical culture." According to Hulliung, Machiavelli's intention was to crush the Christian worldview and replace it with another.³⁶ Machiavelli, therefore, maintains that "a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things for which men are held good, since he is often under a necessity, to maintain his state, of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion. And so he need... not depart from good, when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity."³⁷

Fully away from people's moral sensitivities and of the fact that people attach great importance to morality in politics, "just a few lines after he absolved the ruler of the need to honour agreements and keep promises, Machiavelli stresses that he [the ruler] nevertheless must appear 'merciful, humane, honest, and religious, and to be so.' If he fails to do this, and is then tainted by an association with opposite traits, his days as a ruler are numbered." This is because the people, as Machiavelli acknowledges, expect their leaders to act in accordance with an accepted moral code; and if a ruler hopes to survive, he must consider public moral expectations.³⁸

The above advice not to depart from good when possible is not because it is morally right but because it is politically expedient. Machiavelli therefore, according to Zmora, "examines the relationship between politics and morality from the point of view of one whose objectives are political; he instrumentalizes morality" – that morality is at the service of politics does not mean (opines Zmora) that Machiavelli divorces politics from morality: "Had he not believed in an intimate connection between the two, it would be impossible to attribute to him the claim that political interest is the highest consideration as well as the measure of morality."³⁹ In addition:

Machiavelli did not entirely repudiate the moral legacy of Christianity. For had he disregarded it entirely, he would have undermined the realism that is so fundamental to his political thought. On the other hand, his admiration of ancient Rome did not prevent him from rejecting classical political philosophy, nor did it lead him to seek the solution to the problem of the relationship between politics and morality in an alleged pagan ethic which demands the sacrifice of the individual for the good of the commonwealth.⁴⁰

It is *impossible then to ignore morality*. Howbeit, it is *equally impossible to ignore the threat it poses to politics and the political order*. The only way (Machiavelli reasons) to bridge the gap between moral expectations and the imperative not to fulfil them is by the intelligent use of hypocrisy, deception, and intimidation. This advice may be useful to a good or bad ruler, but it is above all, intended by Machiavelli to serve the interest or good of the State as such, and of political order in general. Furthermore, to "the question of why, exactly, governments must resort to immorality in order to survive – especially if their subjects expect them to be moral" – Machiavelli responds:

... [because] all this will not be necessary or even advisable 'if all men were good.' But this is not the case. Machiavelli attributes to subjects the same traits he recommends to their ruler: They, too, are 'pretenders and dissemblers' (but not great). And because they 'do not observe faith to you, you also do not have to observe it with them.' In Machiavelli's view, a ruler is not being immoral when he preempts his would-be betrayer by betraying him first. Man's nature makes him prone to betraying his fellow; his only true loyalty is to himself.... 'For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself to learn to be able not to be good....'⁴¹

The above remains relevant because "the masses that expect a ruler to behave morally are the same masses that will applaud immoral behaviour if it results in political success." From the foregoing, Zmora concludes that moral principles do not reign supreme. In the hierarchy of values, politics remains at the top. However, that morality presupposes politics is deduced from Machiavelli's position that the distinction between good and evil originated with the coming together of men in a political association. The tragic relationship between politics and morality is once more captured by Zmora thus;

Politics is the necessary foundation of morality. If there is a tragic dimension to the relationship between the two, it is to be found here: On the one hand, politics without moral sanction is liable to deteriorate into a destructive tool for the advancement of private interests that have nothing to do with the general good. Politics of this sort will create precisely the kind of situation that it was meant to avoid. On the other hand, giving the demands of ethics pride of place endangers the political order that safeguards morality.... It is a deeply human paradox that politics has often to behave as if the morality that depends on it is neither a relevant consideration nor a significant goal.⁴²

The real Machiavellian distinction, Zmora continues, is not between politics and morality; rather, the distinction is between *moral politics* – that is, a politics that is subservient to moral codes and is therefore itself a threat to the very conditions which allow morality to exist – and *political morality*, that is, the one that accommodates Machiavellian *virtu*. Zmora adds that Machiavelli is not an enemy of morality as such. More than once, he expresses his wish that men behave according to conventional moral norms; i.e., that they be honest and decent. Yet he is undoubtedly an enemy of those ethical principles that are likely to thwart fundamental political objectives, and in so doing, to destroy the essential basis for moral, civilized behaviour. Lastly, Zmora observes that the political morality envisaged by Machiavelli is not a stable system. There are no universally applicable rules of conduct; hence, "If Machiavelli's is a morality without a stable foundation, that is because it is grounded in politics itself, which is in constant flux. It is a morality without definite rules, without a transcendent moral underpinning... nor an unbending framework. Our only guide is politics, and the imitation of the lion and the fox."⁴³

Conclusion

From the foregoing, this paper identified two puzzling aspects of Machiavelli's political theory: "the paradox of *virtu* and *fortuna*" and the "politics-morality paradox." The former assisted in the appreciation of the latter. It is a paradox that the "prudent" prince who is virtuous (in the Machiavellian sense) has sometimes to rely on chance or luck (fortune) to succeed. In other words, for a General to win a war, he needs both virtue (good soldiers) and fortune (good luck). This is exemplified in the story of Cesare Borgia – who, though possessed *virtu*, was not fortunate due to the untimely death of his father. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to underscore that despite the above premises, Machiavelli still believed that Dame Fortune can be manipulated (beaten) to one's favour; for through his creative power and assertiveness (virtue), man can control and shape his destiny against the flux that fortune unleashed.

Since morality can only thrive where there is a reasonable level of security, as pointed out by Zmora and Geerken, it is equally a paradox, a terrible one indeed; that the moral existence of a society can be secured only by political foundations whose creation requires the very means like force, cruelty and deceit which undermine common or conventional morality. Again, it is noteworthy that the task of laying solid political foundations on which moral existence can repose involves (because of human nature) unending maintenance. This depicts that man has no universal, foolproof rules of conduct to guide either his political deliberations or his moral choices. Hence, not only politics, but morality too is in a perpetual crisis, engulfed in uncertainty and constrained by necessity. Only the *virtuous* who can manipulate Dame Fortune can be

fortunate in politics. That is to say that *political morality*, history has shown, often precedes *moral politics*. The relationship between politics and morality, as illustrated above, is really a tragic and paradoxical one.

Endnotes

1. L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 11.
2. G.H.R. Parkinson, "Ethics and Politics in Machiavelli," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 18 (Jan., 1955): 43.
3. S.S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little Brown, 1960) 237. Also see S. Mukherjee and S. Ramaswamy, *A History of Political Thought: Plato to Marx*, (New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private Ltd., 2007), 147.
4. A. Fagothey, *Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*, 2nd Edition, (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby Company, 1959), 231. Also see: B. C. Okpata, "A Philosophical Discourse on Cardinal Virtues," *Journal of Philosophy, Policy and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (Oct., 2025): 149-159.
5. H. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," *Azure*, (Winter 5765/2005): 128-129.
6. Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 92-95. Also see H. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 129.
7. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 129; Q. Skinner's *Machiavelli*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 42-43.
8. N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. D. Donno, (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), 61-62.
9. L. Strauss, "Niccolo Machiavelli," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd Edition, ed. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 301.
10. N. Wood's "Machiavelli's Concept of Virtue Reconsidered," *Political Studies* (1967), 159-72. Also see J. H. Geerken, "Machiavelli Studies since 1969," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 37, No.2 (Apr.-Jan., 1976): 360.
11. Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, *A History of Political Thought*, 145.
12. Geerken, "Machiavelli Studies since 1969," 360-361.
13. Parkinson, "Ethics and Politics in Machiavelli," 43.
14. Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, *A History of Political Thought*, 146.
15. W.K. Hancock, cited in Parkinson, "Ethics and Politics in Machiavelli," 43.
16. Geerken, "Machiavelli Studies since 1969," 361-362.
17. J. Seigel's "Virtu in and since the Renaissance," *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 5 Vols., ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribners, 1973-1974), IV, 476-86. Also see Geerken, "Machiavelli Studies since 1969," 362.
18. H. F. Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thoughts of Niccolo Machiavelli*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1984. Also see Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, *A History of Political Thought*, 159.
19. Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, *A History of Political Thought*, 159.
20. N. Machiavelli, *The Prince* trans. N. H. Thomas, (East Bridgewater: World Publications Group, Inc., 2008), 156.
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22. Bernard, *Why Machiavelli Matters*, 82.
23. Bernard, *Why Machiavelli Matters*, 85.
24. *Discourses* II, 22 cited in Bernard, *Why Machiavelli Matters*, 88.
25. Bernard, *Why Machiavelli Matters*, 90.
26. Bernard, *Why Machiavelli Matters*, 92.
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29. B. Croce, *Politics and Morals*, trans. Salvatore J. Castiglione (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 59-60.
30. I. Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Hogarth, 1979), 45.
31. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 124.
32. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 123-127; Geerken, "Machiavelli Studies since 1969," 365.
33. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 126.

34. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 126; also see Geerken, "Machiavelli Studies since 1969," 365.
35. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 133.
36. M. Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, (Princeton: Princeton, 1983), 245.
37. See Chapter 18 of *The Prince* in N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. D. Donno, 69; Machiavelli, *The Prince* trans. N. H. Thomas, 111-112; and Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 126-128, 133, 143 & 144.
38. Therefore, the question of *rulership* is a very difficult and paradoxical one. Good or bad, the ruler is in trouble. He should consequently, be shrewd: knowing when to be good or bad.
39. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 133-135.
40. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 135-136.
41. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 135-137.
42. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 140.
43. Zmora, "Machiavelli's Morals," 142.

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