

Philosophy and Politics: Do They Mix?

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Philosophy and politics: do they meet and mix? This is our question, and to answer it we will try to find, even if randomly, a way – and this way need not be direct but can even be circuitous, such as when we approach it through its opposite, that is, by regarding philosophy and politics not so much in their identity as in what philosophers call their ontological difference, in what makes them essentially different. Difference, however, does not necessarily imply a conflict or contradiction; we might as well just begin by taking politics and philosophy as essentially distinct, unrelated, neutral. In which case, it is now only a matter of choosing which of them to discuss first, thus making it unnecessary to regard one as ahead of the other. There is here no distinction of rank; one is not less than the other; they are simply what the word implies – different. Politics is one thing, philosophy is another; and at this point it does not concern us yet whether they can ever meet, much less mix.

Suppose we take politics first. What is politics? Again, here is a question which needs an answer – and the answer may come randomly from any legitimate source. As the one trying to provide such an answer, I shall naturally be coming from where I find it most convenient to approach it. I think you will not mind where I would like to begin, and that is with the man reputedly political par excellence, none other than the fifteenth century intellectual, Niccolo Machiavelli. However, we shall be concerned not with the man but with his thought, not with his life but with his book - which is considered “the classic on power politics (that) should have owed its birth to the collapse of its author’s own political career.”¹ Was he being hypocritical in writing *The Prince* and dedicating it to the magnificent Lorenzo de Medici? Was he not trying to ingratiate himself with the prince in order to secure the latter’s favor? Was Machiavelli, in other words, not playing Machiavellian in the very act of writing this book? That would not be our question; we will leave to God the right to judge him on that score. Our concern is less intrusive than that, and thus more scientific, namely, that we would like to understand in a more direct way what it is that constitutes politics and being political.



What makes a man political? What is a political man? We shall ask Machiavelli to help us answer this question. There are some of his opinions which are not difficult to agree with, such as: "Men almost always walk in paths beaten by others and act by imitation... [A] prudent man must always tread the path of great men and imitate those who have excelled, so that even if his ability does not match theirs, at least he will achieve some semblance of it."² It is likewise not problematic at all that "[t]hose who become princes by virtue of their abilities . . . acquire dominion with difficulty but maintain it with ease,"³ while "(t)hose who rise from private station to become princes by means of good fortune alone do so with scant effort but remain so with much toil."⁴ Thus, in a manner reminiscent of the biblical parable of the sower, Machiavelli correctly states that "like all things in nature that spring up and grow quickly, states that come hastily into being cannot have proper roots and branches; so the first adverse weather destroys them..."⁵

It is therefore important that "a prince must build on sound foundations, otherwise his downfall was assured."⁶ What foundations Machiavelli has in mind are sound laws and sound military forces. And it is well known that the military forces he cares about are not meant to be mercenaries but troops owned by the state, for "no state, unless it have its own is secure." He continues, "By one's own forces I mean those composed of subjects, citizens or dependents. All others are mercenaries or auxiliary."⁷ So far we have no reason to disagree with Machiavelli, nor is anyone known as a Machiavellian on this account. One may even argue that this is plain management, and possibly a competent one.

Competent management is not what I mean by politics; in fact, I shall in due time distinguish between politics and management. To me, politics often stands in the way of sound management, so much so that they should in no way be confused with one another. What, then, makes politics or 'power politics,' the one for which Machiavelli is known? "A prince," he says, "must have no other objective, no other thought, nor take up any profession but that of war, its methods and its discipline, for that is the only art expected of a ruler."⁸ This is, I'd say, what Emmanuel Levinas has in mind when he opposes politics to morality in his book, *Totality and Infinity*. "The state of war suspends morality," says Levinas.⁹ And this is what Machiavelli is saying in no unclear terms in his classic work on politics.

Very popular is view explicitated in Chapter XVIII of *The Prince*:

You must recognize that there are two ways of fighting: by means of law and by means of force. The first belongs properly to man, the second to animals; but since the first is often insufficient, it is necessary to resort to the second. Therefore, a prince must know how to use both what is proper to man and



what is proper to beasts. . . Since a prince is required to know how to assume a beastlike nature, he must adopt that of the fox and that of the lion; for a lion is defenseless against snares, and a fox is defenseless against wolves. Hence a prince ought to be a fox in recognizing snares and a lion in driving off wolves.¹⁰

If you ask me, this is not all wrong. Indeed, it is almost all correct. A leader has to make use of both the carrot and the stick at appropriate times, and he must be able to recognize snares and wolves in order to deal with them at their strategic level. What makes the position of Machiavelli problematic is a subtle point which, again, Levinas is able to see, smartly detecting the political stance which reduces everything into a war opposed to all morality, which even abandons morality altogether when this is found convenient. To him, a prince does not actually need to *have* all the good qualities, but he certainly must *seem* to have them.¹¹ Here is the classic play between *seeming* and *being*, between appearance and reality, first profoundly articulated by Plato in his unforgettable work, *Republic*.

Machiavelli's position is here articulated by Thrasymachus, who defends the rule of the strong man. Relevant to our discussion at this point is such statement of his as follows:

Well then, since the sages tell me that 'appearance counts for more than reality' and determines our happiness, I had better think entirely of appearances; I must put up a façade that has all the outward appearance of virtue, but I must always have at my back the 'cunning, wily fox' of which Archilochus so shrewdly speaks. . . To help us avoid being found out we shall form clubs and secret societies, and we can always learn the art of public speaking, political or forensic; and so we shall get our way by persuasion or force and avoid the penalty for doing our neighbor down.¹²

This is, of course, a take-off from the justly famous theory of ideas, according to which we live in a world of semblance and shadows, and so why not make the most of it? The sophist knows the tricks and manipulates the materials at his disposal to his own advantage. Isn't that what we mean by success?

Plato's dialogues are in fact replete with instances of this fundamental struggle between philosophers and sophists, between the exponents of truth and those of illusion, between the citizens of the intelligible world and those of the sensible world, ultimately the battle between the two forces of good and evil. Machiavelli slyly favors the latter if this will make the prince succeed in his main business, which is, to stay in power. "The just man," says Thrasymachus,

“will be scourged, tortured, and imprisoned, his eyes will be put out, and after enduring every humiliation he will be crucified, and learn at last that we should want not to be, but to seem just.”¹³ Both Machiavelli and Thrasymachus are thus unable to overcome the dichotomy between the two worlds and, like Plato (or Socrates) himself, they are forced to choose between them, favoring the world of shadows, while Plato (or Socrates) sides with the world of forms. Thus ensues what Kant later describes as the ‘battle-field of endless controversies’.¹⁴

Unfortunately, this battle-field extends beyond the safe arena of philosophical discourse and rips into the very heart of the mundane lives of men, tearing them at times into violently diverging camps. The result is a war where spoils are all that count. That is the spirit of politics where victory brings power and position at any cost. This is why Machiavelli is reputed to have said that the end justifies the means. He might not have said it so blatantly, but it is true that what he says amounts to the same. Let’s hear it, so to speak, straight from the horse’s mouth:

It follows, then, that a wise prince cannot and should not keep his pledge when it is against his interest to do so and when his reasons for making the pledge are no longer operative. . . . Therefore a prince will not actually need to have all the (good) qualities..., but he must surely seem to have them. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that having them all and always conforming to them would be harmful, while appearing to have them would be useful. That is, it will be well for him t see and, actually, to be merciful, faithful, humane, frank, and religious. But he should preserve a disposition which will make a reversal of conduct possible in case the need arises. It must be understood, however, that a prince...cannot observe all of those virtues for which men are reputed good, because it is often necessary to act against mercy, against faith, against humanity, against frankness, against religion in order to preserve the state. Thus he must be disposed to change according as the winds of fortune and the alterations of circumstance dictate. As I have already said, he must stick to the good so long as he can, but, being compelled by necessity, he must be ready to take the way of evil.¹⁵

Our very own, the former President Ferdinand Marcos, tried it; in our parts he is the epitome of Machiavellian thought. Whether his reign succeeded or not is amply recorded in the pages of our history books, and the impact of that experiment on authoritarian rule is still felt in every nook of our cultural and political life, of which little, if at all, is something we can take pride in. The

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culture of corruption and mediocrity which now pervades our society is traceable in large part to those days. The evil it spawned was not finally overthrown by politics but by something other than politics, to which we shall return later.

Machiavelli justifies his position as follows: "If all men were good, this would be a bad precept, but since they are evil and would not keep a pledge to you, then you need not keep yours to them."¹⁶ I quote him here in order to point out to you an important source of his political slant. It makes a difference how one views human nature. If your premise is that man is good, that would lead to consequences different from those if your premise is that man is evil. The latter is clearly the position of Machiavelli and, since we are at this, also of Thomas Hobbes.

Very well known is how Hobbes describes man's natural condition in Chapter XIII of the *Leviathan*:

Nature has made men so equal, in the faculties of body and mind, as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself . . . Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called War, and such a war as is of every man against every man . . . and (under such condition) the life of man (is) solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Thus, man, in the state of nature, is a wolf to every man.

A graphic illustration of this can be found, again, in Plato's *Republic*, in Thrasymachus' narration of the story of Gyges:

He was a shepherd in the service of the then king of Lydia, and one day there was a great storm and an earthquake in the district where he was pasturing his flock and a chasm opened in the earth. He was much amazed, and descended into the chasm and saw many astonishing things there, among them, so the story goes, a bronze horse, which was hollow and fitted with doors, through which he peeped and saw a corpse of more than human size. He took nothing from it save a gold ring it had on its finger, and then made his way out. He was

wearing this ring when he attended the usual meeting of shepherds which reported monthly to the king on the state of his flocks; and as he was sitting there with the others he happened to twist the bezel of the ring towards the inside of his hand. Thereupon he became invisible to his companion, and they began to refer to him as if he had left them. He was astonished, and began fingering the ring again, and turned the bezel outwards; whereupon he became visible again. When he saw this he started experimenting with the ring to see if it really had this power, and found that every time he turned the bezel inwards he became invisible, and when he turned it outwards he became visible. Having made his discovery he managed to get himself included in the party that was to report to the king, and when he arrived seduced the queen and with her help attacked and murdered the king and seized the throne.¹⁷

The point to the story has to do with the reduction of man to his naked self, his most natural self, once the layers of socially induced inhibitions have been removed. Man behaves well, so to speak, only by force, only for fear of being punished when their misdemeanors are found out. However, once liberated from such possibility of detection and sanction, his true self begins to show. In the case of Gyges, he seduced the queen, killed the king and usurped the kingdom, showing thereby that man, left to his nature, is evil. Such evil nature is checked only by social conventions, called by Sigmund Freud the ego or, even moreso, the super-ego.

It is not surprising that Thrasymachus, the sophist, favors strong and totalitarian rule. Both Hobbes and Machiavelli, who consider human nature to be bad, end up clamoring for the same type of government. Justice, says Thrasymachus, is what is in the interest of the stronger party.¹⁸ "To be really precise," he opines, "one must say that the ruler, in so far as he is a ruler, makes no mistake, and so infallibly enacts what is best for himself, which his subjects must perform. And so, as I said to begin with, 'right' means the interest of the stronger party."¹⁹ This, I would like to point out, is an exact image of Hobbes' *Leviathan*. 'Leviathan' is a borrowed term, no doubt from nowhere else than the Holy Scripture, referring to a great animal, monstrous in most cases, such as in Isaiah 27:1 and especially in Psalm 74:14. Here is how Hobbes describes what he means by Leviathan in the Introduction of his book:

Nature (the Art whereby God has made and governs the World) is by the Art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an Artificial Animal. For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs, the beginning whereof is in some



principal part within; why may we not say, that all Automata (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as does a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the Heart but a Spring; and the Nerves but so many Strings; and the Joints but so many Wheels giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer? Art goes yet further, imitating that Rational and most excellent work of Nature, Man. For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON – WEALTH or STATE (in Latin CIVITAS) which is but the Artificial Man...

Since man is a wolf to all other men, Hobbes envisions a State able to discipline its citizens by engulfing them, as appropriately depicted in the frontispiece of his book, the picture of a mighty ruler whose body subsumes all the individuals composing the commonwealth. What easily comes to mind is a state such as Tibet and Myanmar, or something like China and Russia until recently, if one takes to heart what daily news and current publications say of them. The view is one of a tyrannical government, certainly the worst of Plato's degenerate types, one of extreme subjection.²⁰ Is the tyrant, consciously or unconsciously, the ideal of the political man? Perhaps no person of today in his right mind will answer this question in the affirmative, and yet isn't this actually the logical conclusion of the premises of Thrasymachus, Hobbes and Machiavelli?

Why is the politician ceaselessly waging battle if not to grab or maintain power? If, indeed, the end justifies the means, then the prince can use any means, fair or foul, in order to secure his political end which, according to the Machiavellian paradigm, is power. Can there be any other political end than power? Any other end might be an end, yes, but it may not be construed as something political. Power is what grabs the politician just as much as the politician grabs power. This is what makes our physically puny President a smart politician, that she is able to stay in power and seems capable of hanging in there until the elections of 2010, and this despite ceaseless attempts to dislodge her. This is not to say she is doing right, only that she is being politically astute. Political astuteness is not to be confused with righteousness, especially if by it we mean moral righteousness. Levinas comes in here very handily again, that politics suspends morality.

If, then, power is all that counts for a politician, and if ultimate power is absolute, then the ideal of a political man is absolute power which is what dictatorship and tyranny are all about. Perhaps not all dictatorship is tyrannical since we also speak of the former as possibly benevolent; one never speaks of benevolent tyranny. So, a Lee Kuan Yew may be a dictator but he cannot be spoken of as a tyrant. Is he then a politician? Yes, in so far as he struggles for power; it is immaterial that he finally succeeds to keep his power and even

bring his country to greater heights. Another dictator, Adolf Hitler, eventually brought Germany to Point Zero and failed to keep the throne.

There is something shaky about power as an ultimate goal. It needs constant watch, or else it can slip through one's grasp without one's being aware of it. This is perhaps why a politician is in ceaseless war against a chameleon of enemies. A true politician cannot afford to rest. The tendency is to guard one's turf at whatever cost, and this is what makes one a genuine Machiavellian. What if he converts his goal to something other than power at any cost, so that he begins to care less about his position and more about, say, virtue? Then, he will no longer be a politician in the mold of Machiavelli. If we equate politics with Machiavellian politics, we will then be going beyond what truly deserves to be called politics. One is no longer a politician, but something else. What else? Perhaps a leader transcending politics, one like Christ or Gandhi, or at least someone like Peter Drucker, the management guru.

When Aristotle makes politics the extension of ethics,²¹ he means by this not only that ethics flows naturally into our practical affairs but also that politics is not to be construed as anything averse to morality. Man, he says, is "by nature a political animal."²² By this, however, he means that it is man's nature to live in a state. As the poet would say, no man is an island; he is always a part of the main. One does not find a man who is not a member of a society which, as an institution, is called a *polis* or a state. Hence, before he begins Book I, Aristotle contends that "we ought to go into the whole business of *politeia*, or constitution, in order that we may round off that part which deals with Man." At least two things deserve notice here. He speaks of the whole business of "*politeia* or constitution." By equating *politeia* with constitution we know right away that he speaks differently from Machiavelli. Here, as in his other works, Aristotle is basically a scientist who is looking at things, in this case governments and constitutions, in an effort to classify them. This is why it is a major section of his political classic where he presumes to have identified six possible constitutions or governments, as follows:

As we have seen, constitution and *politeuma* are really the same; the citizen body is the sovereign power in states. Sovereignty must reside either in one man, or in a few, or in the many. Whenever the One, the Few, or the Many rule with a view to the common weal, these constitutions must be right; but if they look to the advantage of one section only, be it the One or the Few or the Mass, it is a deviation. . . . The usual names for right constitutions are as follows: (1) One man rule aiming at the common good – Kingship. (2) Rule of more than one man but only a few – Aristocracy. (3) Rule exercised by the bulk of the citizens for the good of the whole community –

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Polity. The corresponding deviations are: from kingship, tyranny' from aristocracy, oligarchy; from polity or constitutional by the many, democracy.²³

One might well say that Machiavelli, for his part, is doing only a segment of this whole scientific enterprise of Aristotle, and only that part which belongs to the political deviations, for his concern is only with the prince and how he can secure power for himself. That, curiously, is tyranny, which Aristotle defines as "sole rule for the benefit of the sole ruler," never mind if it will bring benefit to the few or to the whole. Seen in this light, it might be better to distinguish between politics (which we should give to Machiavelli) and state or organizational management (which more properly belongs to Aristotle). Thus, the term 'politics,' when used alternately to refer to Machiavelli and Aristotle, should be clearly defined and never be confused.

The other important point to consider is that Aristotle regards politics as the science which "rounds off that part which deals with Man." Man, of course, is not the only topic of science. There are also God and the World. Together, these three – God, World and Man - constitute the triumvirate of general ontologies, classically referred to as Theodicy, Cosmology and Psychology; all the others are subsumed under each of them, whose umbrella is Metaphysics or, simply, Ontology. That part, which deals with Man, culminates in Politics, says Aristotle, the greatest of our early systematizers of knowledge.

And so, politics presupposes psychology or a concept of man. As we said before, it is because Thrasymachus, Hobbes and Machiavelli view man as inherently evil that they favor the politics of the strong man; hence, power politics. Suppose we view man differently? Suppose we consider man to be originally good? "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains," goes the famous opening line of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*.²⁴ The result of this Rousseauistic premise is one of a purgative process, by which layers and layers of psycho-social epistemologies are torn down in order to unveil the original source of man's pristine nature. Something like the *epoche* of Husserl is here undertaken, the aim of which is to unconceal the 'pure consciousness.'²⁵ Rousseau calls it the *general will*, which "is always right and always tends to the public advantage".²⁶ 'Right' in this sense has a moral import, something which stands directly opposed to Machiavelli's politics.

It is this general will which Immanuel Kant calls the good will. "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*," goes the famous line that opens the first chapter of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. One is reminded here of what we often hear on Christmastide: *Peace on earth to men of good will*. Here the reference to 'men of good will' is not

incidental but intentional. Good will is at bottom what makes for the unsullied nature of man, and whoever retains it has that childlike quality that qualifies him to what Christians call heaven. If, then, we speculate man's original nature to be good, shall we still have a political man?

Let's continue to listen, but first to John Locke.

God, who hath given the World to Men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of Life, and convenience. The Earth, and all that is therein, is given to Men for the Support and Comfort of their being. And though all the Fruits it naturally produces, and Beasts it feeds, belong to Mankind in common, as they are produced by the spontaneous hand of Nature: and no body has originally a private Dominion, exclusive of the rest of Mankind, in any of them, as they are thus in their natural state: yet being given for the use of Men, there must of necessity be a means to appropriate some way or other before they can be of any use, or at all beneficial to any particular Man. The Fruit, or Venison, which nourishes the wild *Indian*, who knows no Inclosure, and is still a Tenant in common, must be his, and so his, i.e. a part of him, that another can no longer have any right to it, before it can do him any good for the support of his Life. . . The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*.²⁷

I quoted Locke lengthily because of the conceptual beauty of what he is trying to say, but let us make sure we recognize that what's relevant to our discussion is what's stated at the start of his exposition. It is almost always the case that when one begins with a theological assumption it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that man, being a divine creation, is by nature good. In this case the philosopher singles out reason as a source of excellence, a faculty used "to the best advantage of life and convenience." It is this rational faculty which, in the course of history, is variously referred to as soul, self, ego, consciousness, spirit, apperception, and so forth. This consciousness, according to Husserl, has been so clouded by countless presuppositions (*Voraussetzungen*) that it now needs to be cleansed and purified. For this reason, René Descartes is rightly considered as the father of modernity, the first to radically apply what became known as the universal methodic doubt which, almost two centuries later, Husserl may be said to have improved through the εποχῆ.



This technical work of perfecting the tool of reason is largely epistemological and may thus be mistakenly thought to have little to do with the subject of our discussion. This epistemological digression, however, is designed to show how this, which Kant calls pure reason, is actually the equivalent in the moral order of what he refers to as the good will. This good will is no doubt a direct influence of Rousseau whose general will is synonymous to the pristine nature of man before he is corrupted by society. Thus, man is by nature good and will remain good if he continues to live according to his nature. This is, of course, no different from what the Chinese philosopher, Mencius, has been harping about.

Mencius said,

No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others... My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human.²⁸

This compassionate heart is, so to speak, the Alpha and Omega of the human act. The many points in-between are so many ways one may diverge from the correct path, which Aristotle calls the Golden Mean. The Golden Mean is not something mechanical and subject to simple computation, for it arises from intelligence which is being responsibly modified by freedom. A heart of compassion is a heart that lives; it doesn't measure but rather proceeds from an uncalculating source and posits no conditions. It is what Kant, in his technical vocabulary, dubs the categorical imperative. Manuals on ethics refer to this type of morality as *deontological*, for it refrains from getting itself fixated on any ontological objective, goal or interest, whether pragmatic or utilitarian. This is the kind of ethics being propagated today by such neo-Kantians as John Rawls²⁹ and Thomas Nagel.³⁰ Here is, of course, the field of pure and genuine ethical motivations which one finds among the world's greatest moralists of both East and West. For instance, in the *Bhagavad-Gita* Krishna tells Arjuna, "To action alone has thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction."³¹ Likewise, the Chinese concept of *yi* translated as

the "oughtness" of a situation is, according to Fung Yu-Lan, the same as a categorical imperative.³²

Such an act, so-called deontological, does not include politically motivated moves which are linked to a particular interest, that of the prince. Thus, if we define politics in terms of Machiavelli's *Prince*, we will have no recourse but to accept Ricoeur's perception that it stands completely opposed to morality, that is to say, opposed to the deontological principle which presupposes no motives outside of the law itself. A very good illustration of this is the stance of Socrates in the dialogue "Crito" where we find his friends enticing him to cheat death and escape from prison. To them Socrates argued that he seemed to hear a voice "murmuring in my ears, like the sound of the flute in the ears of the mystic; that voice, I say, is humming in my ears and prevents me from hearing any other."³³ The voice he heard was coming from the Law itself telling him: "Listen, then, Socrates, to us who have brought you up. Think not of life and children first, and of justice afterwards, but of justice first, that you may be justified before the princes of the world below."³⁴

This is what Immanuel Kant means when he claims that "[w]hat is essential in the moral worth of actions is that the moral law should directly determine the will."³⁵ He continues: "The essential point in all determination of the will through the moral law is this: as a free will, and thus not only without co-operating with sensuous impulses but even rejecting all of them and checking all inclinations so far as they could be antagonistic to the law, it is determined merely by the law."³⁶ This is because "[t]he moral law, which alone is truly, i.e., in every respect, objective, completely excludes the influence of self-love from the highest practical principle and forever checks self-conceit, which decrees the subjective conditions of self-love as laws. . . The moral law, therefore, is even subjectively a cause of respect."³⁷

A good man, such as required by the highest standards of ethics, is not tantamount to a simpleton. The best example we have of such a good man is, unquestionably, the biblical Jesus who has shown in life and death how it is to be so smart as to outwit every malicious enemy without much trying. For example:

They came to Jerusalem again, and as Jesus was walking in the Temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, 'What authority have you for acting like this? Or who gave you authority to do these things?' Jesus said to them, 'I will ask you a question, only one; answer me and I will tell my authority for acting like this. John's baptism: did it come from heaven, or from man? Answer me that.' And they argued it out this way among themselves: 'If we say from heaven, he will say, "Then why did you refuse to



believe him?" But dare we say from man?' – they had the people to fear, for everyone held that John was a real prophet. So their reply to Jesus was, 'We do not know'. And Jesus said to them, 'Nor will I tell you my authority for acting like this'. (Mark 11:27-33)

Another, even more famous, anecdote is the one on the question of whether to give tribute to Caesar.

Next they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to catch him out in what he said. These came and said to him, 'Master, we know you are an honest man...Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay, yes or no?' Seeing through their hypocrisy he said to them, 'Why do you set this trap for me? Hand me a denarius and let me see it.' They handed him one and he said, 'Whose head is this? Whose name?' 'Caesar's' they told him. Jesus said to them, 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God'. This reply took them completely by surprise. (Mark 12:13-17)

No doubt, Jesus is not only intelligent; he is smart. He is equal to his foes and is not afraid of them. One must be as gentle as a dove, but as cunning as a serpent, he says.³⁸ Is Jesus capable of this only because he is God? Certainly this is not the intent of the evangelist, for it doesn't take a god to be so intelligent and smart as this. Indeed, if one reads the best of today's management books, one may wonder if these new writers have not first read the Bible before they have arrived at their management insights.

This is also what, in effect, Sun Tzu is trying to say in his *Art of War*.³⁹ First of all, the title alone makes it clear that the author is writing about war, and yet there is nothing of the crude lapse into outright evil in all the techniques he tries to teach. In simple, elegant tone Sun Tzu is able to make good the promise of his book, which is, to show war not as anything bestial but as an art, as a preoccupation worthy of a man. There are no short cuts here; the warrior is challenged to keep a keen eye on every aspect of the action, but nowhere forgetting the rules of propriety. "Those who use arms well cultivate the Way and keep the rules," he says, "Thus they can govern in such a way as to prevail over the corrupt."⁴⁰

It is interesting what Jesus says to his disciples, "I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves." (Matthew 10:16) There is nowhere he advises his missionaries to go down to the beastly level. What Sun Tzu says is for a warrior to be "extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness" and thereby be the director even "of the



opponent's fate."⁴¹ The word "formlessness" is intriguing; in fact, it implies the agility to assume any form, which is possible only if one is formless.⁴² This has more to do with management than with politics. Where politics is after the enemy's head, management aims at having the work or mission done and victory achieved. "Therefore the consummation of forming an army is to arrive at formlessness," Sun Tzu declares, "When you have no form, undercover espionage cannot find out anything, intelligence cannot form a strategy."⁴³ The *élan vital* of Bergson is formless, and that's why it is creative and continuously evolves.⁴⁴ Competent leadership is flexible and is able to maneuver things effectively according to existing conditions. Even where Sun Tzu speaks of deception,⁴⁵ he means only trickery, not greed or 'wolfishness'. What he tries to say is that the warrior needs to move swiftly like the wind, even as it goes slowly like a forest, or be rapacious as a fire or immovable as a mountain.⁴⁶ Rapaciousness might cause a few raised eyebrows, but Li Quan explains: "It is rapacious as fire across a plain, not leaving a single blade of grass." And so, the warrior is compared to the rapacious fire which thoroughly spreads and leaves nothing unburnt. The appropriate term for this is 'thoroughness'; skillful management is not haphazard but thorough, leaving no stone unturned, as they say.

The formless ingenuity of which Sun Tzu speaks is not opposed to morality, and thus it is not the kind of politics Machiavelli has in mind. Morality, in Sun Tzu's case, is not a mere ornament but is actually a key factor in planning and decision-making. Smart is not so much a person who does whatever suits him, good or bad, as he who is able to achieve his objectives without having to throw ethics overboard. That is why, compared to Sun Tzu, Machiavelli's way is naïve and simplistic. Confucius' golden rule and Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative are two formulations of the same unwritten, natural principle of morality, which should not lightly be exchanged for convenience, which is what Machiavelli amounts to doing. If one would like to see philosophy and politics mix, one may have to go not to Machiavelli but to Sun Tzu. But so as not to confuse them, one might call politics the former, and 'management' or 'leadership' the latter. Keeping this distinction in mind, we may then say that politics cannot mix with philosophy. If philosophy is love of wisdom, and if wisdom implies truth, we have to give it to Sun Tzu but not to Machiavelli, whose spirit is driven by convenience and thus not averse to the opposite of truth, which is lies. The kind of politics which opposes morality spawns lies, which in turn breeds corruption. In our country we saw this happen during the Marcos regime, the time in which to historically trace the origins of the culture of corruption that continues to plague us, resulting in the mediocrity which has cut us down to size. If we will listen to Sun Tzu, we have



a great task before us. We need to keep to our track again and return to formlessness.

That will be another major theme to speculate and write about. At this point, I would like to rest my pen in order to bring this little essay to a close.

ENDNOTES

¹ Daniel Donno, Introduction to his translation of Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 1.

² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter VI, 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter VII, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter XII, 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter XIII, 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter XIV, 35.

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 21.

¹⁰ Machiavelli, Chapter XVIII, p. 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹² Plato, *The Republic* 365, trans. H.D.P. Lee (England: Penguin Books, 1967), 96-97.

¹³ *The Republic* 362, 93.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Müller (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), xxii.

¹⁵ Machiavelli, Chapter XVIII, 62-63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷ Plato, *The Republic* 359-360, 90-91.

¹⁸ *Republic* 338, 65.

¹⁹ *Republic* 341, 68.

²⁰ *Republic* 564, p. 337.

²¹ It is noteworthy that as Aristotle ends his *Ethics* he passes to the subject of politics.

²² Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. I, Chapter 1, trans. T.A. Sinclair (England: Penguin Books, 1967), 28; also see Book III, Chapter 6, 114.

²³ Aristotle, *Politics Bk. III, Ch. 8*, 115-116.

²⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Chapter I, ed. Lester g. Crocker (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 7.

²⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 31-33, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 96-103. "Instead now of remaining at this (natural) standpoint, we propose to alter it radically... We do not abandon the thesis we have adopted, we make no change in our conviction, which remains in itself what it is so long as we do not introduce new motives of judgment... And yet the thesis undergoes a modification – whilst remaining in itself what it is, we set it as it were 'out of action,' we 'disconnect it,' 'bracket it.' It still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket, like the disconnected outside the connexional system. We can also say: The thesis is experience as lived (*Erlebnis*), but we make 'no use of it... In relation to every thesis and wholly uncoerced we can use this peculiar *εποχη*, (epokhe – abstention), a certain refraining from judgment which is compatible with the unshaken and unshakable because self-evidencing conviction of Truth. The thesis is 'put out of action,' bracketed, it passes off into the modified status of a 'bracketed thesis,' and the judgment *simpliciter* into 'bracketed judgment.'" "We put out of action the general thesis which belongs to the essence of the natural standpoint, we lace in brackets whatever it includes respecting the nature of Being: this entire natural world therefore which is continually 'there for us,' 'present to our hand,' and will ever remain there, is a 'fact-world' of which we continue to be conscious, even though it pleases us to put in brackets... I do not then deny this 'world,' as though I were a sophist, I do not doubt that it is there as though I were a sceptic; but I use the 'phenomenological' *εποχη*, which completely bars me from using any judgment that concerns spatio-temporal existence... I disconnect them all, I make absolutely no use of their standards, I do not appropriate a single one of the propositions that enter into their systems..." "Thus we fix our eyes steadily upon the sphere of Consciousness and study what it is that we find immanent in it. . . Consciousness in itself has a being of its own which in its absolute uniqueness of nature remains unaffected by the phenomenological disconnexion. It therefore remains over as a 'phenomenological residuum,' as a region of Being which is in principle unique, and can become in fact the field of a new science – the science of Phenomenology. . . (T)o exercise it in full consciousness of its import will turn out to be the necessary operation which renders 'pure' consciousness accessible to us, and subsequently the whole phenomenological region."

²⁶ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Ch. III, 30.

²⁷ John Locke, *The Second Treatise* 26-27, in *Two Treatises of Government* (New York: New American Library, 1965), 328-329.

²⁸ *Mencius II.A.6*, trans. D.C. Lau (England: Penguin Books, 1970), 82-83.

²⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). See esp. #40, 221ff.



³⁰ Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). "The position which I shall defend resembles that of Kant in two respects: First, it provides an account of ethical motivation which does not rely on the assumption that a motivational factor is already present among the conditions of any moral requirement...There are reasons for action which are specifically moral; it is because they represent moral requirements that they can motivate, and not vice versa... The second way in which my position resembles Kant is that it assigns a central role in the operation of ethical motives to a certain feature of the agent's metaphysical concept of himself. On Kant's view the conception is that of freedom, whereas on my view it is the conception of oneself as merely a person among others equally real. However, different as they are, both are thought to be conceptions which we cannot escape..." (13-14)

³¹ *The Bhagavad-Gita, Chapter 2:47*, in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A Moore (eds.), *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 110.

³² Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), 42.

³³ Plato, *Crito*, in *The Works of Plato*, ed. Irwin Edman (New York: Modern Library, 1956), 106.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1956), 74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁸ "Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves." (Matthew 10:16)

³⁹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambala, 1988).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 104. Without doubt Jesus directs the whole scenario even of 'the hour,' the time and place of his death. How he eludes his enemies in life and how he allows himself to be betrayed and reduced to the level of a criminal at death is all within his own written script. This explains the radical paradigm shift that he effects, transforming the cross, for instance, from a symbol of utter ignominy to one worthy of the highest veneration. We have similar cases in Philippine history, though certainly smaller in scope than Jesus, in the persons of Rizal and Ninoy who may be considered the turning-points in their respective generations.

⁴² Despite Max Scheler's reference to it as 'formalistic,' the ethics of Kant is actually an icon of what Sun Tzu means by 'formlessness.' In no way does Kant tell us *what* to do, but only *how* to do it. The confusion arises, of course, from Kant's own reference to the principles he uncovers, of both speculative and practical reason, as *apriori* forms.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁴ Unforgettable is the metaphor of a snowball to illustrate the *élan vital*. "My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing – rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow . . . The truth is that we change without ceasing, and that the state itself is nothing but change." Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), 4. For the state to be nothing but change is for it to, in Sun Tzu's term, "formless."

⁴⁵ "So a military force is established by deception, mobilized by gain, and adapted by division and combination." Sun Tzu, 117.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 117.