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QUESTA INCONSTANTE DEA:
MACHIAVELLI'S AMORAL FORTUNA

Abstract

Machiavelli often portrays fortuna as an inconstant, amoral power that gives or takes benefits regardless of its beneficiaries' or victims' merits. Yet though fortune appears omnipotent, he also insists that human beings have a power of their own – virtù – that can reduce its impact. What is this virtù that can lessen the harms inflicted by fortuna? This, I'll propose, is the real question posed by Machiavelli's often deeply perplexing reflections on fortune. His main concerns are ethical: he is interested in how human beings react to the seemingly arbitrary advantages and disadvantages they call fortuna, and how they help to create their good or bad circumstances by their own good or bad choices.

*Questa da molti è detta onnipotente;
perchè qualunque in questa vita viene,
o tardi, o presto la sua forza sente.
Costei spesso i buon sotto i piè tiene,
l'improbi inalza e, se mai ti promette
cosa veruna, mai te la mantiene.
E sottosopra e regni e stati mette,
secondo che a lei pare, e giusti priva
del bene che alli ingiusti larga dette.
Questa inconstante dea e mobil diva
l'indegni spesso sopra un seggio pone,
dove chi degno n'è mai non arriva.
Costei il tempo a modo suo dispone;
questa ci esalta, questa ci disface,
sanza pietà, senza legge o ragione.*

By many this goddess is called omnipotent;
because whoever comes into this life
either early or late feels her force.
Often she keeps the good beneath her feet,
the wicked raises up; and if she ever promises
you anything, she does not keep it.
She turns states and kingdoms upside down
as it suits her, and deprives the just
of the good that she freely gives to the unjust.
This inconstant goddess and fickle deity
often sets the undeserving on a throne
which the deserving never reach.
She disposes the times in her own mode;
this person she exalts, this one unmakes
without pity, without law or reason.

(N. MACHIAVELLI, *Di Fortuna*, lines 25-39)

In Machiavelli's 193-line poem *Di Fortuna*, one of his earliest extant writings on the subject, fortune has several characteristics that reappear in his *Prince* and other works. Firstly, it exercises very great power over all human beings, even those who consider

themselves strong or prudent enough to evade its force. Secondly, while fortune may turn its powers to either good or bad, on balance its effects are harmful to men, and even to gods: this feminine power is ‘injurious and importunate’, a ‘cruel goddess’ whose power (*potenzia*) *even by Jove is feared*. Finally, fortune is a morally arbitrary – indeed, an amoral – power that gives or takes without regard for just deserts or solemn agreements. When someone receives benefits that he did not earn, we call this good fortune; when he suffers undeserved harm, we call it bad. Anyone who thinks he’s succeeded in winning over Fortuna’s unwavering support will soon find out that she is utterly unreliable: *if she promises you anything, never does she keep her promise*.

A casual reader of either *Di Fortuna* or the *Prince* might well conclude that Machiavelli’s picture of fortune as an overbearingly powerful, cruel, and amoral goddess is part of the cosmological background informing his political realism. If the human world is ultimately at the mercy of such random forces, perhaps people have no choice but to try and contain the harm they inflict by whatever means they can devise. And at times, it seems, the most effective way to avoid becoming *fortuna*’s victim is to imitate her potency, her cruelty, and her indifference to justice or promises¹. Yet Machiavelli’s verses intimate that human beings might have considerably more choice than this in how they respond to fortune’s vicissitudes. Though fortune is ‘said by many’ to be omnipotent, human beings have a power of their own – *virtú* – that can reduce its impact: *fortuna*’s “*natural power forces every man, and her reign is always violent, if virtú eccessiva does not abate it* [Sua natural potenza ogni uomo sforza;/el regno suo è sempre violento/ se virtú eccessiva non l’ammorza].”²

What then is this *virtú* that can lessen the harms inflicted by fortune, and how should it be applied? This, I’ll propose, is the real question posed by Machiavelli’s varied, ambiguous, and often deeply perplexing reflections on fortune. He is not especially concerned with cosmological or theoretical questions about fortune’s objective powers. His basic concerns are ethical: he is interested in how human beings react to the seemingly arbitrary advantages and disadvantages they call *fortuna*, and how they help to create their good or bad circumstances by their own good or bad choices.

1. Fortune and *virtú*: can good fortune be a bad thing?

The *Prince*’s first chapter states that there are two basic ‘modes’ (*modi*) for acquiring new states or dominions: “either with the arms of others or with one’s own, either by fortune or by *virtú* [o con l’arme d’altri o con le proprie, o per fortuna o per virtú].” This binary distinction between fortune and *virtú* frames the entire book³. In each of its 26 chapters readers are invited to ask, in relation to specific examples: how far did either fortune or *virtú* help this particular prince or state to acquire (*acquisitare*) power, and then to maintain (*mantenere*) it? By themselves, *fortuna* and *virtú* are not obviously antithetical. But by pairing them with opposed types of ‘arms’ – others’ arms or one’s own – Machiavelli

¹ Machiavelli seems to suggest this in the *Prince*, chapter 25.

² N. MACHIAVELLI, *Di Fortuna*, lines 13-15.

³ For a chapter-by-chapter reading, see E. BENNER, *Machiavelli’s Prince: A New Reading*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013.

signals that he conceives them as sharply contrasting *modi operandi*, not merely different ones.

What does it mean to acquire power by one's own arms and *virtù*? In the *Prince* and other works, Machiavelli associates *virtù* with a wide array of qualities: physical boldness, spiritedness, excellence, industry, foresight, caution, respect for limits, patience, discipline, good orders, and moral goodness. Some of these qualities are especially esteemed in military operations; others are accorded high valued in civilian life, or needed to set up strong political foundations. In the context of his general *fortuna-virtù* antithesis, however, Machiavelli's *virtù* is the quality or set of qualities that enables people to acquire or maintain desired goods through their own deliberate and independent efforts. Fortune, by contrast, is whatever causes them to acquire, maintain, or lose desired goods through no deliberate effort of their own.

This initial contrast considers *fortuna* and *virtù* in narrowly instrumental terms. Machiavelli asks, or at this stage seems to ask, only how each 'mode' can help particular princes attain ends – acquiring and maintaining power – that all new princes are supposed to have. For now, he remains silent on the question of whether some ends can be pursued more effectively with others' arms and fortune, some with one's own arms and *virtù*. He says nothing at the outset, moreover, about whether some political ends are more realistic or praiseworthy than others. If this were the terminus of Machiavelli's discussion instead of the beginning, it might appear that his *fortuna/virtù* distinction is part of an attempt to found a value-neutral political science, one concerned to evaluate the efficiency of various means to ends, not the quality of ends themselves.

These first appearances of neutrality are soon unsettled, however – as first appearances often are in the *Prince* and Machiavelli's other works. Machiavelli is a great master of artfully misleading writing: he often feigns indifference to matters in which he goes on to show great interest, or stridently asserts views that he discredits in surrounding arguments and examples⁴. If it seems at first that either fortune or *virtù*, others' arms or one's own, may bring high-quality successes, this impression is undercut in chapter 6, where we read that *fortuna* is much the inferior mode. Though fortune and *virtù* are equally efficient causes of *acquiring*, “nonetheless, he who has relied less on fortune has *maintained* himself more.” It turns out that while fortune may help a prince make quick and easy conquests, it is far less helpful when he wants to keep them. Indeed, Machiavelli now declares that maintaining depends entirely on *virtù*: new princes meet with “more or less difficulty in maintaining” their states “according to whether the one who acquires them is more or less virtuous,” and not at all according to their better or worse fortune.

Chapter 7 opens by reiterating this view of fortune-dependence:

Coloro e' quali solamente per fortuna diventano di privati principi, con poco fatica diventono, ma con assai si mantengono; e non hanno alcuna difficoltà fra via, perché vi volano; ma tutte le difficoltà nascono quando e' sono posti.

Those who become princes from private individual solely by fortune become so with little trouble, but maintain themselves with much. They have no difficulty along the path because they fly there, but all the difficulties arise when they are in place.

⁴ These ironic methods are examined in detail in E. BENNER, *Machiavelli's Prince*.

Why are fortune-aided acquisitions so hard to maintain? The reasons become clear, Machiavelli suggests, when – instead of idealising *fortuna*'s mythical powers or denouncing its cruelties – people ask what, in concrete terms, it means to acquire a state (or anything else) by fortune. Chapter 6 mentioned a first set of conditions that makes it easier for aspiring princes to rise to great power: *occasione* (opportunity). By itself the word sounds as vague and mysterious as *fortuna*, but Machiavelli's examples link it to quite specific circumstances. To say that fortune provided someone with the gift of *occasione* is to say that he found pre-existing conditions of disorder or weakness that made it relatively easy to impose new 'orders' of his own. Chapters 3-5 showed how the Romans seized the opportunity provided by the Greeks' divisions and poor defences to expand their influence in Greece, eventually conquering the whole province. The Romans were fortunate in finding neighbouring peoples weak and sorely deficient in their own arms and *virtú*; to the extent that other people's defects assisted their conquests, the Romans relied on fortune rather than *virtú* alone.

Do those who work mainly through their own arms and *virtú* need at least some fortunate *occasione*/opportunity in order to work virtuously? Machiavelli seems to say so in chapter 6, with regard to the 'most excellent' Cyrus, Theseus, Romulus and Moses: "Without that opportunity their *virtú* of spirit [*di animo*] would have been eliminated, and without that *virtú* the opportunity would have been in vain." But the preceding chapters already hinted that too much fortune-given opportunity is perilous for those who exploit it. Their neighbours' divisions seduced the Romans into thinking that they could easily acquire more and more empire. And indeed they could; the problems came when they tried to maintain what they'd acquired with so few difficulties. Machiavelli never directly lectures his readers on the Romans' errors. Having seemed to praise their modes of expansion to the skies in chapter 3, however, he goes on in chapters 4-5 to discuss the Greeks' and other conquered peoples' ferocious rebellions against Roman dominance. These revolts compelled the reluctant Romans to adopt ever more violent methods of control. Ironically, by taking advantage of others' weaknesses to press their own ascendant fortune ever further, the Romans created harsh new imperatives – the 'necessity' to maintain what they'd acquired with so little trouble – that made them lose control over their own external policy choices. Back at home, Machiavelli points out almost in passing, the Romans started tearing each other apart as their leaders fought over the spoils of conquest. They soon wound up under the stifling, chronically unstable rule of the emperors and their military yoke. In short, Machiavelli's Romans crushed all possible challengers – at the price of committing political and moral suicide at home. And they left a terrible legacy. We read in the *Discorsi* that Rome's imperial overreaching destroyed the republic's cherished liberty: it "eliminated all republics and all civil ways of life" up to the present, so that the 'free way of life' enjoyed in the past was replaced by 'a servile way of life now.'⁵

This Roman example perfectly illustrates Machiavelli's maxim that princes of fortune "have no difficulty along the path because they fly there, but all the difficulties arise

⁵ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Discourses*, II.2.

when they are in place.”⁶ Too much *occasione*/opportunity encourages opportunism, the tendency to exploit present advantages without thinking hard enough about the future costs of one’s immediate gains. Those who work solely through their own arms and *virtù* need some opportunity, but they should beware of mistaking ease of acquisition with ease in maintaining. In *Di Fortuna* Machiavelli represents opportunity’s misleadingly straightforward helpfulness by describing *Occasione* as a *tousle-haired and simple maiden* found *always frisking about among the wheels* in Fortuna’s grand palazzo, playing sport with Audacity and Youth and bringing Anxiety and Penitence in her train.

In chapter 7’s long opening paragraph, Machiavelli identifies other specific ways to acquire power by fortune. This happens, he writes, “when a state is granted to someone either for money or by the grace [*o per danari o per grazia*] of whoever grants it.” As an example of acquiring by money he cites those emperors in Rome who “attained the empire by corrupting [*per corruzione*] the soldiers.” His main example of acquiring by another’s grace is the Persian king Darius, who set up client-rulers in Greek cities “so that they might hold on to those cities for his security and glory,” not for their own. The bulk of chapter 7 discusses Cesare Borgia, the *Prince’s* premier exemplar of a prince who “acquired his state through the fortune of his father [Rodrigo Borgia, Pope Alexander VI] and lost it through the same.”

Others’ weakness and disorders, the money or grace of others, inherited advantages: here then are some of the concrete conditions that might be considered gifts of fortune. Machiavelli’s down-to-earth analysis quietly demystifies the fearsome goddess he depicted in *Di Fortuna*, showing that at least some of the undeserved successes and failures seen in human affairs work through specific, knowable conditions and choices that might have been made differently. Seen in this light, fortune’s powers begin to look less impressive than they do when people behold their effects, but don’t closely examine their causes.

And if fortune’s powers cease to terrify once they are reduced to human proportions, its value as a helpmate in human endeavours also begins to drop under scrutiny. At the beginning of chapter 7 Machiavelli outlines the chief disadvantages of relying on fortune’s arbitrary gifts not just for maintaining political power, but also for acquiring it. People who rely on any of fortune’s boons, first of all, enjoy a *deceptively quick and easy rise to power*: they fly high and make speedy conquests, but face numerous difficulties later on. To depend on fortune, secondly, is to *depend on other, unreliable people*. Fortune-gifted individuals “rest simply on the will and fortune of whoever has given a state to them, which are,” Machiavelli points out, “two very inconstant and unstable things [*cose volubilissime e instabili*].” Finally, *things gained too quickly by another’s ‘grace’ are easily destroyed*: “states that have come to be suddenly, like all things in nature that are born and grow quickly, cannot have roots and branches, so that the first adverse weather eliminates them.”

All this makes the great goddess *Fortuna* look like a far less attractive partner for princes who hope to maintain whatever power they acquire. In the *Prince* and all his works, Machiavelli associates fortune with variation, instability, short-sightedness, and

⁶ Machiavelli’s *principi* may be imperial cities or states as well as individuals.

weakness. By contrast, actions based on high-quality *virtù* confer firmness and security on their products, chiefly by imposing and working through good ‘orders’ (*ordini*).

Good orders and foundations (*fondamenti*) are therefore always the product of *virtù*; foundations built on fortune are always weak. And the main question Machiavelli asks readers to consider throughout the *Prince* is: do the general modes and particular actions described in each chapter result in strong, lasting foundations?

Not all kinds of *virtù* are equally apt for conferring strong political order. What Machiavelli calls ‘*virtù* of spirit’ (*di animo*) is especially effective for acquiring power, winning battles, or making far-flung conquests; he often notes its salience in men who rise rapidly to political power through military exploits. But his exemplars of this spirited kind of *virtù* tend to be less skilled at maintaining political power, or at founding a secure legacy for future generations, than those whom he commends for their abilities to work patiently, tolerating many hardships and under often severe constraints, in order to plant new political foundations on deep roots. The best example of this kind of virtuous acquiring and maintaining in the *Prince* is Hiero of Syracuse, who makes an understated yet significant appearance at the end of chapter 6. Unlike Cyrus, Romulus, and the others whose *virtù di animo* needed a good measure of opportunity to work its wonders, Hiero acquired authority by election rather than force or subterfuge: the Syracusans ‘chose’ him as their captain, Machiavelli says, because he ‘merited’ (*merito*) that position in the eyes of his colleagues. In his ‘modes’ or methods of action, then, Hiero exemplifies the kind of high-quality *virtù* that requires very little from fortune: he gained power by his own demonstrated merits, not by exploiting others’ weaknesses or by buying supporters, or by using family connections or foreign armies. His ends were also modest: he didn’t found a sprawling new empire, or get elevated to the rank of a god. He merely helped rid Syracusans of a decadent tyranny, replaced useless mercenary forces with a strong civilian army, and forged new alliances that made for stable peace and strengthened his country’s ties with other Greeks – as Machiavelli, of course, dearly wished Italian leaders would do in Italy.

Machiavelli prefaces his discussion of Hiero by calling him a ‘lesser example’ (*uno esemplo minore*) of political *virtù*, by comparison with the ‘higher examples’ (*alti esempli*) of Romulus, Cyrus, Theseus, and Moses. But unlike all these men, whose deeds he praises more noisily, Machiavelli says that Hiero’s deeds won the unqualified praise of his chroniclers – and the highest glory of posterity. “So,” says the chapter’s final sentence – just before chapter 7’s opening statement that those who rise by fortune have no difficulty acquiring but many maintaining ‘because they fly’ to power – Hiero “went through a great deal of trouble [*assai fatica*] to acquire, and little to maintain.”

These long-term, very considerable advantages of working one’s way patiently and virtuously to power often go unrecognized; the *virtù* of those who acquire authority in this way appears ‘less’ praiseworthy than that of men who pursue more grandiose ambitions. By calling Hiero a ‘lesser’ example, Machiavelli challenges readers to look beyond dazzling first appearances of *virtù* and to notice that the actions most conducive to lasting good order may not involve unilateral self-assertion, sudden great gains, or great celebrity.

His arguments about the disadvantages of acquiring (or maintaining) with the help of fortune imply a strong value judgement. To say that someone acquires or does anything

else by *virtù* is very high praise in Machiavelli's book, though some kinds of *virtù* – particularly those that manifest highly reflective qualities, not just energy or high spirits – are more praiseworthy than others. What you get by *virtù* you earn, by a good use of qualities that help human beings to build 'orders' of their own that are well armed against threats, including those that come from fortune. By contrast, to say that someone acquired or succeeded with fortune's help not only implies that he does not deserve full credit for his attainments. It also implies that he may be at fault if, and in so far as, he *depended on* specific gifts of fortune for his success. The Romans, for example, were already secure and thriving when they decided to expand beyond Italy; Machiavelli says that there was no pressing necessity behind this decision⁷. They could have done otherwise, expanding only under necessity, but opted instead to push their luck by seeking pre-emptively to control all their neighbours lest one of them should pose a serious threat at some later date. Though at first Machiavelli seems to approve of this extremely far-sighted pre-emptive strategy, his low-key comments on its ruinous effects for Roman *virtù* tell a different, critical story. Here and throughout much of the *Prince*, the author makes deeds speak far more truly than his own most striking words.

These arguments imply not just that it is better to rely on *virtù* than fortune; it is also better not to rely on both at once, or sometimes on one, sometimes the other. Most aspiring princes and other readers might think that the ideal is to have as much fortune and *virtù* as possible. Machiavelli's position, however, is that the more you rely on fortune and the arms of others, the less solidly you rely on your own arms and *virtù*. The thinking behind this view is very ancient, and based on psychological common sense⁸. Too much good fortune spoils its favourites, breeding dangerous complacency: it can lull even virtuous people into forgetting that one should *never* count on fortune's constant friendship⁹. The longer they rely on it, the less hard they work to build up their own self-sufficient resources, and succumb to the illusion that they owe their successes to their own merits. There is, moreover, a self-corroding quality in the methods Machiavelli associates with fortune. Once you start courting supporters by money and favours, you create expectations that you will keep forking out more. When one day your coffers run dry, or you have no new favours to hand out, you become far less popular than if you'd never tried to buy support in the first place¹⁰. Like the wheel of fortune, the same policy

⁷ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Prince*, chapter 3: the Romans “decided to make war with Philip and Antiochus in Greece in order not to have to do so in Italy; and they could have avoided both one and the other for a time, but they did not want to.” See E. BENNER, *Machiavelli's Prince*, p. 21 on the similarities and differences between *fortuna* and *necessità*.

⁸ Many Greek and Roman writers use the *fortune-virtue* (*tuché-arête*, *fortuna-virtus*) antithesis to question the prudence of seemingly successful enterprises that rely on unstable foundations. For examples, see THUCYDIDES, *History of the Peloponnesian War*; SALLUST, *War with Catiline*, 1-13; PLUTARCH, *On Fortune*, in ID., *Moralia*, II, 74-89, and *On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander*, in ID., *Moralia*, IV, 382-487.

⁹ Compare ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*, 1390-1391b on how goods due to fortune have bad effects on character and endanger their beneficiaries: the wealthy become insolent and arrogant (*hubristai...kai hyperêphanoi*) and think themselves worthy to rule. Also see ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 13, 3-5: “because happiness requires gifts of fortune in addition, some people think that it is the same as good fortune [*eutuchia*]. But this is not so, since even good fortune itself when excessive [*hyperballousa*] is an impediment to activity, and perhaps indeed no longer deserves to be called good fortune.”

¹⁰ As Machiavelli points out in *Prince*, chapter 16.

that helped you fly to greatness now throws you down, destroying whatever extravagant ambitions you once had.

In sum, the hidden costs of relying to any degree on fortune are so high that they cancel out any short-term advantages of such reliance. Even if you happen to *have* good fortune as well as *virtù*, then, you do better to *rely* only on your own arms and *virtù*. Whenever Machiavelli stresses the role played by fortune in an agent's actions, however successful, he implies some deficiency in the quality of those actions. Princes who acquire states by 'fortune and *virtù*' do not have an optimal combination of his *due modi*; they rely on an unsustainable alliance between two fundamentally opposed modes of action¹¹.

2. *An exemplary prince of fortune: Cesare Borgia*

In his lengthy survey of Cesare Borgia's fortunate career, Machiavelli invites readers to apply his general remarks about the disadvantages of fortune-reliance to a detailed example. At a very young age Cesare experienced a meteoric rise to power, thanks to his father, Pope Alexander VI, who put him in charge of the Papal army and sent him off to conquer the Romagna. In exchange for favours from his father, King Louis XII gave him French dukedom, and the title of duc de Valentinois. He went on to seize control over one city after another, soaring to great power as Duke of Romagna. Then, with Alexander's sudden death in 1503, Cesare's ambitions crashed. Without the pope, the prince was nothing. Nevertheless, Machiavelli seems to praise him more effusively than any other individual in the *Prince*. He begins his account by declaring that "I do not know what better teaching I could give to a new prince than the example of [Borgia's] actions." Then at the end of his narration of those actions he writes:

If I summed up all the actions of the duke, I would not know how to reproach him; on the contrary, it seems to me that he should be put forward, as I have done, to be imitated by all those who have risen to empire through fortune and the arms of others.

Yet the devil is in the details, and Machiavelli's discussion of Cesare's particular deeds gives readers plenty of reasons to doubt how far they should credit this seeming praise. The main reason for scepticism is that Cesare's *azioni* repeatedly ignore all the warnings – just outlined in the chapter's first paragraph – about relying on modes that produce fortune-dependence. Having at first acquired troops, territories, and noble titles through his father's fortune, Cesare was determined, Machiavelli tells us, to set his power on more self-sufficient and virtuous foundations. To make the switch from relying on others' arms fortune in acquiring to relying on one's own *virtù* for maintaining is very, very hard to do: success comes only to those who "have so much *virtù* that they know immediately [*subito*] how to prepare to keep what fortune has placed in their laps." When

¹¹ Machiavelli frequently speaks of the 'fortune and virtù' of Rome in the period of its expansion beyond Italy; and of the Medici in Florence. Both were nominally republican, but in practice inclined more and more toward princely 'modes' of rule – modes that Machiavelli associates with increased fortune-dependence.

Machiavelli goes on to describe Cesare's efforts to stand on his own two virtuous feet, his methods rely on the same fortune-dependent *modi* set out shortly before: money, the grace of others, and others' arms.

Machiavelli doesn't say so outright; he leaves it to readers to apply his general tests of fortune and *virtù* for themselves. First, Cesare buys off his enemies' supporters with 'great allowances' and promotions. When this doesn't work, he attacks them with the help of French troops, supplied in exchange for his father's support to King Louis XII's ambitions – thus patently still depending on 'the arms of others'. When later the French try to restrain his expansionism, Cesare switches his allegiances and turns to rely on Spanish troops – still, several years on, the arms of others. After narrating all these twists and turns, Machiavelli declares that Borgia "had laid very good foundations for his power." But by now this praise rings hollow. Readers must weigh these good words against the author's account of his subject's particular deeds.

Machiavelli does appear to praise Borgia for seizing the chaotic, divided Romagna and giving it unity and order. The Pope's son began, Machiavelli tells us, by installing a new governor, Remirro de Orco, "a cruel and ready man, to whom he gave the fullest power." After Remirro imposed order in Romagna, Borgia found a pretext to violently destroy him, thus enabling our model prince to rule a freshly pacified state without incurring popular blame. The incident is often thought to illustrate a classic piece of Machiavellian wisdom: use others to do your dirty work, so that necessary violence is used without making people hate you. This reading assumes that Borgia had, with admirable foresight, thought the whole plan through from the outset.

But this isn't what Machiavelli suggests. "In a short time," he writes, "Remirro," not Cesare, "reduced [Romagna] to peace and unity, with the very greatest reputation for himself." Only after Remirro's success does Borgia realise that by giving such a successful governor "fullest authority" (*plenissima potestà*) in Romagna, he may have created a potential rival to himself. "Then (*di poi*)," not before, Borgia "judged that such excessive authority was not necessary." We get further insights into Cesare's motives from Machiavelli's dispatches (*Legazioni*) from Borgia's court, where the Florentine Secretary spent several months trying to dissuade Borgia from attacking Tuscany. In a letter where he reports that Cesare has thrown Remirro into a dungeon, Machiavelli also writes that Borgia's French soldiers had recently abandoned him, exasperated after enduring repeated attacks from country people in the Romagna who were hostile to Borgia's government. A good illustration of why it is dangerous to rely so heavily on others' arms or grace, both inconstant and unstable things – especially at such a late stage of Cesare's attempts to go it alone. He thereby "lost," Machiavelli writes, "more than half his forces and two-thirds of his reputation."¹² Against this background, Borgia's scapegoating of Remirro looks less like a masterstroke of virtuoso foresight than a desperate bid to flex his muscles and silence dissent, at a time when his defences were falling apart.

Why would Machiavelli praise Borgia so warmly, only to compromise his good words with sharply critical insinuations? Machiavelli is fond of saying that appearances deceive. And if we look again at his texts, a good deal of their apparent praise is less warm than it

¹² See N. MACHIAVELLI, *Legations*, 20 and 23 December 1502; 26 November 1502.

first appears. When Machiavelli first mentions Cesare Borgia in the *Prince*, he compares him with another military man who rose to political power. Milan's Duke Francesco Sforza first acquired his state as a mercenary soldier – a soldier of fortune – but then worked hard “by proper means and with a great *virtú* of his own [*per li debiti mezzi e con una grande sua virtú*]” to set his power on a stable, legitimate footing; “and that which he had acquired with a thousand pains he maintained with little trouble.” Compared with the unreserved warmth of this description, Machiavelli's first words about Borgia have a somewhat chilling effect. He omits any reference to Borgia's *virtú*, saying that the duke “acquired and lost” with his father's fortune – not even his fortune is his own! – “although that he made use of every deed and did all those things that should be done by a prudent and virtuous man [*non ostante che per lui si usassi ogni opera e facessinsi tutte quelle cose che per uno prudente e virtuoso uomo si doveva fare*] to put his roots in the states that the arms and fortune of others had given him.” Machiavelli could have said simply that Borgia *was* a prudent and virtuous man. Instead he goes to uncomfortably wordy lengths not to say this. In fact, his references to Cesare's *virtú* are tepid or ambiguous throughout most of the chapter.

Machiavelli's comparison of Sforza and Borgia exemplifies a classic device of ironic praise, that is, apparent praise that subtly exposes flaws. Instead of directly criticizing a subject, the writer sets him alongside another person who is praised for qualities or actions that are pointedly not noted in the other. The entire discussion of Borgia's attempts to move from fortune- to *virtú*-reliance employs another, ancient technique of ironic writing, used by many of Machiavelli's favourite Greek and Roman writers: Xenophon, Sallust, Tacitus, Plutarch¹³. The author sets up a contrast, sometimes a very jarring one, between good words and less good deeds. Readers who notice the tension have to choose what to believe: the dubious deeds laid out for them to judge for themselves – or the voice that loudly, perhaps unreasonably, praises them.

Ancient writers used this technique to train readers to see through misleadingly impressive appearances in politics. Machiavelli gives it his own creative twists. He often lavishes words of praise on states or leaders who follow amoral maxims. Yet if you look closely at his accounts of their specific actions, you can see that they're heading for very serious trouble. The ultimate test of Borgia's efforts to build lasting, virtuous *fondamenti* comes with the sudden death of his father, some 9 months after Cesare had his talented governor Remirro murdered, along with several other allies whom he had come to mistrust. Machiavelli says that Cesare's ‘only’ error was to back the wrong cardinal, Giuliano della Rovere, for pope – naively trusting della Rovere's promises to let Cesare keep his states in the Romagna¹⁴. But now comes the chapter's crowning irony: after all the hyperactive shifts of alliance, deceptions, and violence he committed in hopes of

¹³ For specific examples and comparisons, see E. BENNER, *Machiavelli's Prince* and EAD., *Machiavelli's Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009.

¹⁴ In his diplomatic dispatches Machiavelli remarked that Borgia “allows himself to be carried away by his rash confidence, believing that the word of others is more to be relied on than his own”; N. MACHIAVELLI, *Legations* 4 November 1503. On the famous contradiction between Machiavelli's assertion that Cesare's downfall was ‘not his fault’ and his imprudent support for della Rovere's papacy, see G. SASSO, *Niccolò Machiavelli: Storia del suo pensiero politico*, Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici, Napoli 1958.

becoming independent, Cesare *still* looks to the Papacy to support his crumbling state. If not his father, the next pope can make or break him. And so it transpired: as Pope Julius II, della Rovere soon deprived Cesare of the state he had won through the fortune of his father, and sent him into exile in Spain. The collapse of Borgia's seemingly boundless ambitions bears out one of the *Prince's* most essential teachings:

One should never fall in the belief that you can find someone to pick you up. Whether it does not happen or it happens, it is not security for you, because that defence was base and did not depend on you. And those defences alone are good, are certain, are lasting, that depend on you yourself and on your *virtù*¹⁵.

Recall that Machiavelli had earlier put Borgia forward “to be imitated by all those who have risen to empire through fortune and the arms of others.” Scholars often interpret this as: ‘Machiavelli says all princes should imitate Borgia.’ But again, look again. What he says is not that *every* prince should imitate Borgia, but only an inferior class of princes: those who have risen to power by fortune. Princes who acquire by their own arms and *virtù* need not imitate Borgia.

Machiavelli's *Di Fortuna* had pointed out that high-flying princes of fortune make huge gains, yet fail to hold them. Here and in the *Prince* he recurrently associates high [*alto*] ascent with fortune-dependent flight before the inevitable fall, and ‘happiness’ with ephemeral self-satisfaction lacking any firm foundations:

If your eyes light on what is beyond, in one panel Caesar [*Cesare*] and Alexander¹⁶ you will see among those who were happy [*felici*] while alive...

Yet nevertheless the coveted harbour one of the two failed to reach, and the other, covered with wounds, in his enemy's shadow was slain.

After this appear countless men who, that they might fall to earth with a heavier crash, with this goddess have climbed to the highest heights [*costei altissimo*].

Among these, captive, dead, and mangled, lie Cyrus and Pompey, though Fortune carried both of them up to the heavens.

Their fate is summed up in a feral image of flight and fall:

Have you ever seen anywhere how a raging eagle moves, driven by hunger and fasting?

And how he carries a tortoise on high [*alto*], that the force of its fall may break it, and he can feed on the dead flesh?

So Fortune not that a man may remain on high [*in alto*] carries him up, but that as he plunges down she may delight, and as he falls may weep¹⁷.

By comparing *fortuna* to a raging eagle and high-soaring men to tortoises, Machiavelli deflates the latter's vainglorious hopes. Such men like to see themselves as the more virile partner in their collaborations with fickle fortune, pushing and shoving her to get what they want. But the truth is that she retains total control over her importunate

¹⁵ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Prince*, chapter 25.

¹⁶ A sly punning reference to the ancient and recent, Borgia carriers of these names.

¹⁷ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Di Fortuna*, lines 160-183.

suitors. By soliciting her aid for their projects, they give her the power to destroy them at any moment she chooses¹⁸.

3. *Knowledge and free will: can people choose not to depend on fortune?*

But did Cesare Borgia have any real choice but to rely quite heavily on fortune, and thus to risk becoming its victim? At times Machiavelli seems to say that his sad downfall had nothing to do with his own choices, which were sound enough:

If one considers all the steps of the duke, one will see that he had made for himself great foundations for future power...And if his orders did not bring profit to him, it was not his fault [*non fu sua colpa*], because this arose from an extraordinary and extreme malignity of fortune [*una straordinaria ed estrema malignità di fortuna*].

A common reading of this passage is that Machiavelli made Cesare his prime example in order to illustrate fortune's supreme and utterly random power over human affairs. If even he – with all his exemplary qualities – could be hurled down by *fortuna*, other princes should be warned that brute bad luck can kill even their best efforts. On this view Borgia's ultimate failure had nothing to do with deficient *virtù*, and everything to do with forces beyond his control; Cesare 'only' failed because of one cruel stroke of fortune – his father's death. But as I've suggested, Machiavelli's account of Cesare's deeds is anything but a story of near-success. It describes a series of increasingly desperate ploys to hold on to the state his father handed him on a platter, always using money and 'the arms of others' which somehow never seem to bring him security. Instead of taking Machiavelli's fatalistic claim about Borgia's failure at face value, we should read it as a challenge to look for a more down-to-earth explanation in the details of Machiavelli's lengthy narration – which quietly exposes the flaws in the fortunate young man's own choices.

Perhaps the most basic problem lay in Cesare's over-ambitious ends. Machiavelli observes that his various allies – first the Orsini, later the French – began to oppose him when he insisted on going beyond his original, more modest territorial designs to attack ever more cities in the Romagna, Lombardy, and Tuscany. Men commit a grave error, Machiavelli declares in the *Discourses*, "who do not know how to put limits [*porre termini*] to their hopes, and, by founding themselves on these without otherwise measuring themselves, they are ruined."¹⁹ Chapters 3-5 of the *Prince* showed how Rome's good fortune in finding other provinces weak and divided lured that city toward ever greater conquests, which led to unforeseen (but foreseeable) difficulties and then to ruin; chapter 7 shows Borgia's difficulties multiplying, running out of control, the more violently he tries to eliminate them.

A pattern is emerging: it seems that those who depend on fortune tend to have more ambitious ends than those who rely on their own arms and *virtù*. Fortune-reliant people or states are especially interested in *grandezza*, in gaining great power and reputation.

¹⁸ For a detailed study of this theme in the *Prince*, chapter 25, see E. BENNER, *Machiavelli's Prince*.

¹⁹ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Discourses*, II.27.

They know that fortune can help them do this more quickly and easily than their own hard work. Those who rely on *virtù* are more interested in long-term stability than in being hailed as ‘great,’ winning every battle, or surmounting all their difficulties overnight. A person’s or state’s modes, then, tell us a good deal about their ends. And to pursue more or less ambitious, limited or boundless ends is a choice. Rome was under no necessity to expand far beyond Italy; Cesare Borgia might have set clear limits to his territorial ambitions, consolidated the territories he already had, and thereby kept his allies on side instead of arousing the suspicion that he would soon try to seize their or their friends’ states. Machiavelli’s dispatches from Borgia’s court express the hope that by signing an agreement not to invade Bologna, “this Duke is now teaching himself to restrain his desires [*si cominci ad averzare ad tenersi delle voglie*] and knows that Fortune does not let him win all of them [*conosca come la fortuna non liene dà tucte vinte*].”²⁰ Machiavelli might insist that Cesare soon lost his states through no fault of his own, but the particulars of his short history of Borgia’s short career tell us otherwise.

Moreover, it is hard to reconcile a fatalistic view of fortune’s power with Machiavelli’s analyses of how that power works through specific types of action. We have already learned that to rely on fortune involves concrete, voluntary measures – paying money, giving favours, or taking advantage of others’ weaknesses – rather than inexplicable gusts of fate. By spelling out these measures in chapter 7’s framing remarks, Machiavelli demystifies the metaphor *fortuna*. He sets in clear view the choices that lead people to lose control of what they gained by such means, and shows that what they blame on bad fortune is often the product of their own actions or negligence. It seems unlikely that having stripped away the myths that permit such excuses, Machiavelli now wants to suggest that there are notable exceptions – that at least a few men, such as Cesare Borgia, can reasonably blame their failures on fortune. His re-description of the cruel omnipotent goddess as a ‘power’ fuelled by particular human choices invites readers to look more closely at the reasons for Borgia’s – or anyone else’s – sudden fall. And it turns out that many, if not all, of the seemingly morally arbitrary conditions that people call *fortuna* arise when people act in one way when they might have acted otherwise, or when they pursue ends that they might have revised. In other words, not all of fortune’s fabled arbitrariness is really as arbitrary as it appears from afar. Had Cesare or the Romans restrained their ambitions, they would not have flown so high or crashed so hard. Both height and crash were due to their choices.

Machiavelli’s fascination with examples of exceedingly fortunate men and cities is often mistaken for admiration. His main interest, however, is educative and prophylactic. He wants readers to examine their actions so that they might start to understand how far human choices are responsible for the disasters casually imputed to fortune²¹. The more

²⁰ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Legations*, 2 December 1502.

²¹ Compare his apparently admiring but subtly critical fictional life of *Castruccio Castracani*. On his deathbed the hero, a ruthlessly opportunistic mercenary-turned-prince, tells his heir that while he leaves behind “a large state,” because “I leave it to you weak and insecure, I am very sorry.” Had he realised that “fortune would cut off in the middle of the journey” his path “to that glory that I promised to have through all my happy successes [*felici successi*],” Castruccio would have striven to have “fewer enemies and less envy” by making friends of peoples he subdued and living his life “more quietly.” His son would then have inherited “a state, if smaller, without a doubt more secure and more solid.”

dazzling someone's good fortune, the harder it is to understand how things later turned so bad. As a brilliant dramatic writer as well as political analyst, Machiavelli's writings often imitate the difficulties people have in seeing beyond the dazzle. Instead of telling readers that Rome or Cesare should have done things differently, he drops numerous hints that help readers see this for themselves – or not. Aspiring princes in a hurry to gain power are likely to read quickly, skimming the text for bits of second-hand wisdom that they can use to further their grandiose aims. They will seize on the most striking phrases and examples, not pausing to notice subtle warnings or advice that they might be better off working through more modestly virtuous 'modes.' As with princes, so with other readers: those who read the *Prince* in hopes of finding an uncomplicated, Machiavellian message may pick out the boldest statements and not trouble themselves too much with the caveats. If they find the amoral advice profound or intriguing, they will be disinclined to notice the subtle ways in which Machiavelli subverts it.

The *Prince* tests readers by moving constantly between the perspective of an impetuous, over-ambitious young man – one seeking the quickest and easiest ways to acquire power, with fortune's help – and judgements more likely to give a state firm foundations. If people reflect on both the manifest temptations of fortune-dependence and its less visible disadvantages, they might begin to feel less helpless in the face of life's vicissitudes and injustices. They can never eliminate those vicissitudes or injustices altogether, but they can choose paths that reduce extreme dependence on fortune. The basis for this philosophical approach to *fortuna* is spelt out in the *Prince*, chapter 25. When people think about bad fortune, more than of good, they tend to focus on its apparently random ravages and horrific destructive powers. Machiavelli echoes this view:

I liken her to one of those ruinous rivers which, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and the buildings, lift the ground from this part, dropping it in another; everyone flees before them, everyone yields to their impetus without being able to hinder them in any part.

Fatalism seems reasonable when one dwells more on fortune's harmful effects than on their causes:

It is not unknown to me that many have held and hold the opinion that worldly things are so governed by fortune and by God, that men cannot correct them with their prudence, indeed that they have no remedy at all; and on account of this they might judge that one need not sweat much over things but let oneself be governed by chance [*sorte*]²². This opinion has been believed more in our times because of the great variability [*variazione*] of things which have been seen and are seen every day, beyond every human conjecture.

Far from dismissing this deterministic opinion, Machiavelli starts by expressing sympathy with it. "When I have thought about this sometimes," he ruminates, "I have been in some part inclined to their opinion." Indeed, if what is 'seen' now and through past experience were all there is to go by, then the view that one need not sweat much over things would seem eminently sensible.

²² Machiavelli generally treats *sorte* (chance) as an even more random disruptive power than fortune.

Nevertheless, so that our free will not be eliminated [*il nostro libero arbitrio non sia spento*], I judge that it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern.

Machiavelli doesn't say why he wants to avoid eliminating 'our free will,' but two reasons can be inferred from his surrounding remarks. Firstly, if we human beings have no choice in how to respond to fortune, necessity, or other factors beyond our control, there would be little reason to praise or blame our actions. And Machiavelli is determined, as he says in chapter 26, that we should be able to claim our share of glory as well as blame. The idea that responsible agency and free will are inseparable from any adequate concept of a human being is expressed in Machiavelli's claim that "God does not want to do everything, so as not to take free will from us and that part of the glory that falls to us."²³ Secondly, fortune's powers are too random and obscure to be measured precisely. Since it is impossible to know exactly how much power fortune has over us, we may reasonably assume that there is *some* margin for the exercise of choice. As Machiavelli put it in the *Discourses*, men 'should never give up' their own small residue of power, even if they knew it was less than half of fortune's. "For, since they do not know [fortune's] end and it proceeds by oblique and unknown ways, they have always to hope," and thus never abandon themselves to fatalism "in whatever fortune and in whatever travail they may find themselves."²⁴ Even if one could somehow ascertain that fortune had ninety-nine per cent influence and free will only one, that one per cent would still leave room for the exercise of self-ordering *virtù*. The failure to do whatever one could within that margin would still be an avoidable, human failure.

4. Responsibility: on blaming fortune

This means that human agents can usually be held responsible for the destructive effects ascribed to *fortuna*, since violent outbreaks of bad 'fortune' can usually be traced to previous failures to exercise *virtù*. For

it is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not provide for [floods] with dykes and dams so that when they rise later, either they go by a canal or their impetus is neither so wanton nor so damaging. It happens similarly with fortune, which demonstrates her power where virtue has not been put in order [*ordinata*] to resist her and therefore turns her impetus where she knows that dams and dykes have not been made to contain her²⁵.

Virtuous individuals do not ask: do arbitrary factors beyond an individual's or city/state's control seriously reduce their freedom? The right answer is: of course they do. *Nondimanco* – one of Machiavelli's favourite words – it is wrong to assume that one can 'blame' those factors for disappointing outcomes. The virtuous expect their choices to be limited even under the best conditions, sometimes severely and unexpectedly. Even the most prudent people must expect setbacks, even outright defeats. They know

²³ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Prince*, chapter 26.

²⁴ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Discourses*, II.29.

²⁵ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Prince*, chapter 25.

that factors beyond their control – not just freak weather-storms, momentary lapses of concentration, and the like, but also choices made by other people in the past and present – can upset their cherished projects. But instead of blaming fortune they ask: how can I best use whatever miniscule margin of freedom I still have to recover? The *virtuoso* man doesn't see every defeat as ruinous, knowing that he can always recover if he is patient, industrious, and disciplined²⁶. People are more inclined to blame fortune when they have unrealistic ends or expectations; when they expect uninterrupted success or seek continuous 'happiness', they confuse occasional setbacks with 'ruin.' Here again, fortune has as much power, and value, as people give it.

Machiavelli does acknowledge that both individuals and polities can have good or bad fortune through inherited advantages or disadvantages: individuals through their family background, cities, states, or provinces through the past and present actions of their governments and wider populations. A virtuous individual can do everything right, but still be thrown down by his city's collective misfortune or imprudence. In his own corrupt times, whatever virtuous Italians one could still find – they were, Machiavelli suspected, few and far between – were prevented from doing much good because of the cumulative imprudence of recent Italian princes and populations.

The best example in the *Prince* of a worthy individual crippled by collective misfortune is not Cesare Borgia, but the book's author. In the Dedication to Lorenzo di Piero de Medici, Machiavelli calls himself the casualty of "a great and continuous malignity of fortune," having been cast into the political wilderness after the Medici returned to political power in Florence in the coup d'état of 1512. But despite his personal suffering, his response is not that of a fortune-dependent victim. Instead of raging against his bad luck or his political enemies, Machiavelli tries to engage with them by writing a book based on his long experience and reading. Instead of blaming his woes – or those of Florence and Italy – on *fortuna's* inscrutable powers, his 'little book' puts the causes of recent collective and personal disasters under a mercilessly honest spotlight. Italian princes kept losing their states to foreign powers because they were poorly armed, relying on mercenary and auxiliary troops – the *arme d'altri* – rather than their own people. "Therefore, these princes of ours...may not accuse fortune" when they fall from power and allow French and Spanish troops to overrun Italy, "but their own indolence."²⁷

The writer of the *Prince* blames not fortune but generations of princely and more general Italian indolence, weak orders, and excessive ambition for his own present plight. Yet he refuses to let their lack of *virtù* arouse his hatred or reduce him to begging for crumbs from the Medici, or from any other prince. For what value, after all, does even the greatest princely fortune have compared with qualities that Machiavelli still

²⁶ Machiavelli frequently observes that the prudent or virtuous respond to setbacks, including the most crushing defeats, by learning from past mistakes and working harder than ever to recover their strength. People who insist on winning every battle or seeking 'ultimate victory' are imprudent, since they overshoot reasonable human limits. For example, see Lucius Lentullus' response to Roman defeats in *Discourses*, III.41, and *Prince*, chapter 21 on the value of staying with allies who lose, since by giving each other steady support through good or bad fortune "you become the companion of a fortune that can revive."

²⁷ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Prince*, chapter 24.

possesses, notwithstanding his current bad luck? His Dedication marvels at “the greatness that fortune and your other qualities promise” to young Lorenzo de’ Medici. But there is a different kind of greatness, perhaps better than princely *grandezza*, in Machiavelli’s little gift of his book on principalities. There is the ‘great diligence’ with which he reflected on its contents, which include things he “came to know and understand in so many years and with so many hardships and dangers for myself.” However small the things of value that he possesses, he acquired them through his own industry and discipline. Princes like Lorenzo rise to greatness by the fortune of their birth rather than through their own diligence, experience, and hardships. They therefore lack the secure, hard-won knowledge that less fortunate men like Machiavelli have. Greater fortune does not necessarily create greater worth. It most certainly does not give its beneficiaries greater security in their most treasured goods, whatever these are. And however harshly fortune may oppress him, Machiavelli still has one thing it cannot take: his hard-earned knowledge, which he now generously offers to share with a fortunate prince, indeed a prince whose ascendant family fortune is directly responsible for Machiavelli’s malignant one. For the Medici princes may have gold and ornaments and greatness, but fortune easily gives these things and just as easily takes them away. Knowledge gained on one’s own is entirely one’s own, come what may; it is any person’s most secure resource for future endeavours, even if he has to crawl back up from the lowest ranks, as Machiavelli would seek to do.

The idea that fortune may be ‘blamed’ or, more broadly, held responsible for human travails, assumes that the adverse conditions one calls *fortuna* are arbitrary deep down: that they cannot be traced to human choices that could have been other than what they were. Machiavelli allows that while some adverse conditions really are arbitrary in this sense, many are not; the responsible, *virtuoso* approach is to examine them honestly and self-critically, asking whether at least some of their worst effects might have been avoided. When histories and other forms of individual and collective self-examination suggest that a large role was played by human imprudence – fed by mental laziness (*ozio*), excessive *ambizione*, and other defects of *virtù* – then we may reasonably ascribe adversity to fortune under one, perhaps surprising condition: namely, that we conceptualize *fortuna* as an instrument or emissary of divine justice. In his poem *Asino* and several other poems, Machiavelli describes fortune’s blind arbitrariness as an element in a cosmos ruled by God through the ‘heavens’²⁸. In *Di Fortuna* we read that Fortune’s wheels keep spinning all day and night

because Heaven commands (and she is not to be resisted)
that Laziness (*ozio*) and Necessity whirl them around.
The latter puts the world in order again, and the first lays it waste²⁹.

Here fortune’s constant variations are born partly of human laziness, which corrodes order, and partly of heaven-sent *necessità*, which purges corruption and restores order. When human orders deteriorate under the influence of luxury and limitless greed, God

²⁸ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Asino*, III.80-119.

²⁹ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Di Fortuna*, lines 82-87.

sends the minor deity *Fortuna* – that goddess who looks so great from the perspective of the lazy and the greedy – to elevate then strike them down:

So blinded are you by your present greed that over your eyes holds a thick veil that things remote you cannot see.

O proud men, ever you have arrogant faces, you who hold the sceptres and the crowns, and of the future do not know a single truth!

From this it comes that heaven, shifting from this to that, changes your states more often than the heat and the ice are changed,

Because if you turned your prudence to knowing the ill and finding its remedy, such great power from heaven would be taken³⁰.

The powers of both God and fortune exceed human powers to control them completely, and move in ways that we cannot entirely grasp. But unlike fortune, God's power is anything but arbitrary. God and the heavens are just, distributing good and bad to those who deserve one or the other. Divine powers unleash fortune's blind force so that it can wreak havoc with human beings whose badness or indolence deserves a good deluge. God uses arbitrariness, or what appears arbitrary from a merely human perspective, to serve cosmic and human justice³¹.

Along the way, fortune's ravages may harm people who don't personally deserve such a pounding – including individuals like Machiavelli who did their best to restore *virtú* to their cities, but were overpowered by rampant corruption. Yet neither Machiavelli nor similar casualties can reasonably accuse fortune or God for their adversities. The larger question is whether it *ever* makes sense to blame fortune or God for one's woes, even if they aren't self-inflicted. It might make sense if we conceive of fortune or God as powers that take a direct interest in every human individual, expecting them to help us in weak moments and reward us for good conduct. But Machiavelli sees neither power in such personal terms. His *fortuna* is indifferent to merit and ruthless toward the weak. And while his God sometimes commands the heavens or fortune to punish or warn, it is presumptuous to expect him to show concern for every individual's fate in the wider cosmos under his control. While Machiavelli and other virtuous victims may well *attribute* their sufferings to fortune and perhaps to God, then, it would be almost as unreasonable for them to *blame* these powers as it is for the un-virtuous Italian princes discussed in chapter 24.

The difference between attributing and blaming is crucial. Italian princes are wrong to blame fortune since their own lack of *virtú* was responsible for opening the floodgates – but also because it makes no sense to blame a morally blind power that owes you nothing, and that perhaps serves to restore good human orders. Virtuous people who suffer as a result of their princes' or fellow-citizens' failings may accuse them, but not fortune, for the same reason. Both virtuous and *virtú*-deficient victims of fortune can reasonably *attribute* their troubles to it. But the ultimate test of their *virtú* is whether,

³⁰ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Decennale secondo*.

³¹ In *Discourses*, II.28 Machiavelli says that the heavens sent the Gauls to launch a violent attack on Rome because of that city's 'inobservance of justice' in violating the *ius gentium*, thus necessitating the Romans to 'pull back to the limits' of their former good orders and justice. See E. BENNER, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, chapter 8.

while recognising that powers beyond their control have thwarted their hopes, they still take full responsibility for their responses to bad fortune. Do they bemoan their fate and wait for someone else to pick them up – or pick themselves up and do what they can to carry on their virtuous labours? Italian princes and Cesare Borgia did the former. In writing the *Prince*, Machiavelli tried to do the latter, devising virtuous orders through writing when he was prevented from founding them in practice.