

The Friendless Republic: Freedom, Faction, and Friendship in Machiavelli's *Discourses*

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Abstract: Civic republicans have traditionally appealed to friendship as a means of preserving popular liberty, but Machiavelli is a notable exception to this rule. In fact, I argue, he views efforts to reconcile friendship and politics as (1) philosophically dubious, because grounded in false conceptions of person and society, and (2) practically harmful, because they perpetuate patterns of asymmetric dependence that are inconsistent with a free way of life. Machiavelli's neglected skepticism about the political potential of friendship deepens his critique of the Ciceronian *concordia*, reveals a diminished idea of the common good, and distances him from the civic republican tradition to which he is so often said to belong.

In both the ancient and Renaissance worlds it was commonplace to characterize relations among citizens as friendships. Civic humanists like Francesco Guicciardini, Leonardo Bruni, and Francesco Patrizi followed Aristotle and Cicero in highlighting friendship's importance to the polity by emphasizing its capacity to counteract selfishness, direct ambition toward the public good, inculcate habits of equity and mutual respect, promote civic cohesion by facilitating sameness of character, and encourage personal responsibility. Serving these manifold functions, friendship is within the "civic republican" tradition¹ consistently singled out for its ability to generate the virtues and affective bonds necessary to a "free way of life" (*vivere libero*).

Though a thinker who hails violent civil discord and even fratricide² would seem an unlikely candidate for membership in a tradition that emphasizes the

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¹Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University University Press, 1955).

²John McCormick, "Machiavellian Democracy: Controlling Elites with Ferocious Populism," *American Political Science Review* 95 (2001): 297–313, and "Machiavelli against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School's 'Guicciardinian Moments,'"

importance of friendship, representatives of the influential Cambridge School have nonetheless sought to characterize Machiavelli as a card-carrying member of the civic republican brotherhood which celebrates friendship's unitive force.³ Among these scholars, Maurizio Viroli has paid especial attention to friendship's special role in prehumanist and Renaissance thought and has argued that Machiavelli endorses a classical vision of political community—the *civitas*—in which citizens are united by norms of “friendship” and pursue a shared vision of the good life.⁴ Such claims strongly suggest that Machiavelli depends on some notion of friendship no less than his civic republican predecessors.

In what follows, however, I will argue not only that Machiavelli rejects the idea of a politics of friendship but also that his rejection of this idea discloses a radical break with the civic republican tradition with which he is so often associated. I make this argument in two broad steps. First, I examine Cicero's conception of friendship and show the ways in which it both supports and is supported by his distinctive conception of social concord (the *concordia ordinum*).⁵ For Cicero, the complementarity of friendship and politics is a prime expression of humanity's natural fitness for social and political life, with properly structured friendships providing crucial sociological support for just institutions and just institutions encouraging the practice of friendship as an essential aspect of human development. Serving in this dual means/end role, friendship integrates the requirements of public and private flourishing like no other association, thus emerging from Cicero's thought not only as a

Political Theory 31 (2003): 615–43; Markus Fischer, “Machiavelli's Rapacious Republicanism,” in *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy*, ed. Paul Rahe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xxxi–lxii; John Warner and John T. Scott, “Sin City: Augustine and Machiavelli's Reordering of Rome,” *Journal of Politics* 73 (2011): 857–71; Michelle T. Clarke, “The Virtues of Republican Citizenship in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*,” *Journal of Politics* 75 (2013): 317–29.

³J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Quentin Skinner, “Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and the Pre-humanist Origins of Republican Ideas,” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 121–42, and *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, *Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴Maurizio Viroli, “Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics,” in Bock, Skinner, and Viroli, *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, 151; cf. 146–52.

⁵I focus on Cicero specifically because his conceptions of friendship and social concord were, as Viroli, “Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics,” 146–52, and Quentin Skinner, “Ambrogio Lorenzetti: The Artist as Political Philosopher,” in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 72 (1986): 6, and “Machiavelli's *Discorsi*,” 122–23, both recognize, extremely influential for civic republicans of Machiavelli's own age. What is more, Machiavelli himself directs us to *De amicitia* by referring to it directly in the midst of his critique of the *concordia*.

proper object of political concern but, more significantly, as a constituent component of the common good that citizens pursue together.

Second, I show that Machiavelli rejects the ideal of a politics of friendship as philosophically impoverished and practically dangerous. His own use of terms like *amici* and *amicizia* reveals a narrowly utilitarian understanding of friendship shorn of the affective and ethical possibilities explored by Cicero, and suggests that he views purely instrumental alliances as the basis of politics.⁶ Such restrictive usage is a product of Machiavelli's view of human nature, which emphasizes the importance of individual self-interest, rejects the classical premise of natural sociability, and ultimately leads to a fundamental reconceptualization of civic relations and the common good. Indeed, it is Machiavelli's stress upon human selfishness that leads him to reject the civic republican view that human beings naturally share a substantively rich set of common ends discoverable through rational dialogue and to embrace, instead, the idea that the common good emerges out of a process of vicious class-based contestation. Machiavelli's retheorization of human nature thus involves (1) a transformation of civic relations as rooted in class antagonism rather than in feelings of friendship, and (2) a diminution of the traditional common good.

Having demonstrated that the ideal of friendship is unsuited to political life, Machiavelli goes on to show that its use (and abuse) has predictably negative consequences for republics. Far from establishing social unity as Cicero believed, the notion of friendship instead reinforced pre-existing social divisions by legitimating the patterns of asymmetric dependence that underwrote them. Both Michelle Clarke and Amanda Maher have recently called attention to Machiavelli's emphasis on problems of structural inequality, and my argument builds on these concerns by showing how ambitious elites exploited the ideal of friendship in order to consolidate and extend their social power.⁷ Thus for Machiavelli, the traditional ideal of friendship is little more than a teleological fantasy exploited by would-be tyrants as a means of deceiving and dominating the public.

Because the term "friendship" is such a vague one, a brief note about its meaning may help clarify what Machiavelli is, and is not, arguing with respect to it. I have already mentioned that Machiavelli uses the term "friendship" to describe the alliances—most especially the *class* alliances—that constitute political life; thus we might understand him to subscribe to some notion of political friendship, albeit a reductive one. But the crucial difference between the Machiavellian and the Ciceronian view of friendship is that the

⁶While there is in Machiavelli's political vision room for something like Aristotelian utility friendship (*NE* 1155b16–1156b35), it will become evident that he excludes—or at least does not depend on—all other types of friendship.

⁷Clarke, "Virtues of Republican Citizenship"; Amanda Maher, "What Skinner Misses about Machiavelli's Freedom," *Journal of Politics* 78, no. 4 (2016): 1003–15.

former presupposes the existence of enemies while the latter embodies the possibility of *all* citizens collectively realizing their natural good through a nonexclusive form of fellowship.

Friendship and the *Concordia*: Cicero's Common Good

In order to see the extent of Machiavelli's break with the civic humanist conception of political community it is first necessary to understand something about its origins, and to that end there is likely no better place to turn than the works of Cicero, which are said by Skinner to constitute a "veritable bible" for the writers of Machiavelli's age.⁸ In addition to being widely read and deeply admired by virtually all *quattrocento* humanists, Cicero was well known to Machiavelli himself and emerged as one of his most important sources concerning all things Roman.⁹ He has the added distinction of having provided a searching and deeply influential treatment of friendship and its role in the city. Thus insofar as Machiavelli sought to reinterpret friendship's place in the political community and re-explain the greatness of Rome, he must confront one of the foremost authorities on both matters.

Cicero's belief in friendship's importance for politics rests upon a view of human-nature-as-*homo-politicus* which establishes a natural complementarity between the individual and the common good. He begins both *De republica* and *De legibus* by strongly affirming man's natural fitness for politics, arguing in the latter that our inborn "good will and kindness," along with our capacity to find consensus through rational deliberation, disposes us toward friendship. Because our commitments to justice and the common good flow directly from the development of our distinctively human capacities for love and reason, they express our nature and specify our good as rational beings. Thus when we affirm the principles of justice, we not only help others realize their human excellence—we realize our own (*De leg.* 1.22, 1.27; cf. *De am.* §§5, 23; *De rep.* 1.39).¹⁰

⁸Skinner, "Ambrogio Lorenzetti," 6, and "Machiavelli's *Discorsi*," 122–23; cf. Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 199–204.

⁹Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 28–29, 255; Paul Rahe, "Situating Machiavelli," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 292–95; Alexander Duff, "Republicanism and the Problem of Ambition: The Critique of Cicero in Machiavelli's *Discourses*," *Journal of Politics* 73 (2011): 980–92.

¹⁰*De leg.* and *De rep.* refer respectively to *Laws* and *The Republic*, in Cicero, *The Republic and The Laws*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Powell and Niall Rudd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). *De off.* refers to Cicero, *On Duties (De Officiis)*, ed. and trans. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). *De am.* refers to *Of Friendship*, in Cicero, *On the Good Life*, trans. Michael Grant (New York: Penguin Books, 1971). Citations to *De am.* are by section and page number in Grant's translation.

Cicero's conception of friendship fits neatly within this teleological vision that makes the city the site of the authoritative human good. In *De amicitia*, he develops an ideal of friendship specifically tailored to cultivate the politically beneficial virtues of "loyalty, honesty, fairness, and generosity" (§5, 186; cf. *Tusc disp.* 90–91). But in order to see why friendship is "the best thing in the world" it must be viewed within Cicero's broader political vision and, more specifically, in its relation to his distinctive conception of social harmony—the *concordia ordinum*. The *concordia* is an idealized depiction of Rome's mixed constitution which shows the common good emerging out of a judicious blending of different social interests:

Just as with stringed instruments or pipes in singers' voices a certain harmony of different sounds must be maintained ..., and as that harmony, though arising from the management of very different notes, produces a pleasing and agreeable sound, so a state, by adjusting the proportions between the highest, lowest, and intermediate classes ... achieves harmony. What, in the case of singing, musicians call harmony is, in the state, concord; it constitutes the tightest and most effective bond of security; and such concord cannot exist without justice. (*De rep.* 2.69)

Before explaining how Cicero's conception of friendship supports the realization of the *concordia*, it is important to understand the form of concord that is being sought. The *concordia* makes important concessions to the realities of life in the late Roman republic and therefore has an eminently and deliberately practical character.¹¹ Cicero is not seeking to eliminate disagreement or give citizens precisely the same interests or desires—to the contrary, his *concordia* presupposes wide social and economic differentiation and all the vigorous contestation that comes with it. His own choral metaphor underscores his awareness of the necessary plurality of political life, for just as harmony requires the melodic tension produced by the combination of different notes, so too does the *concordia* suppose a variety of interests corresponding to different social positions. We must, then, remember that the *concordia* denotes a limited and qualified kind of political consensus.

Though the ideal of the *concordia* was designed for nonideal circumstances it nonetheless retains its character as an ideal, and a relatively ambitious one at that.¹² It embodies the hope that persons of different backgrounds and class positions value the common good as intrinsically desirable and have a working desire to reconcile their disagreements in good faith and by way of shared principles. This hope flows directly out of Cicero's teleological conception of human nature: if citizens are to realize their social and rational

¹¹Joy Connolly, "Cicero's Concordia Ordinum: A Machiavellian Reappraisal," available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1671070>, last accessed April 30, 2018; Jonathan Zarecki, *Cicero's Ideal Statesman in Theory and in Practice* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹²Elizabeth Asmis, "A New Kind of Model: Cicero's Roman Constitution in *De Republica*," *American Journal of Philology* 126, no. 3 (2005): 400–407.

nature then they must experience the connection between their individual flourishing and the good of the community, and this requires that they inhabit a political context oriented toward the realization of a principled, if limited, consensus which genuinely advances the fundamental interests of all. First and foremost, then, the *concordia* is an institutionalization of the rational community that nature has established among human beings, and its object is to instantiate the authoritative ends and purposes that we naturally share. To the degree that this is true, its realization involves more than a temporary alignment of incentives or a “canceling out” of selfish interests. Indeed, it depends decisively on the rational and affective dispositions of political actors who, in order to discover their true common good, must be (1) animated by shared normative commitments, (2) prepared to negotiate in good faith when differences in how to interpret those commitments arise, and (3) willing to sacrifice when the general interest requires it (e.g., *De off.* 1.31, 3.26; *De am.* §25). Where civic life is characterized by this general willingness, a political agreement worthy of the name *concordia* emerges, and political contestation becomes inevitable without also being intractable. Where elites and the people are committed to the possibility of reconciling their differences—where, that is, the ideal of the *concordia* is operative in their minds and informs their perceptions and actions—their disagreements are best viewed as the initial stage in an ongoing process of deliberation and discovery rather than an expression of basic and ineliminable human antagonism. All this suggests that Cicero’s *concordia* represents a reasonably ambitious but still nonutopian vision of the common good built upon a belief in humanity’s natural fitness for politics.

A civic culture which includes an extensive, nonexclusive form of friendship is indispensable to the realization of the *concordia* because of its ability to build and consolidate bonds of trust among persons with different interests. “Take away the bond of kindly feeling from the world,” says Laelius in *De amicitia*, “and no house or city can stand. Even the fields will no longer be cultivated. ... That shows the value of the opposite situation—friendship” (*De am.* §7, 189). Note that “friendship” to which Laelius refers here is only a thin “kindly feeling” that humans naturally feel for one another and does not at all resemble the more intensive virtue friendships that Cicero elegizes. Nonetheless, he thinks such relationships are so important that, in their absence, even the most basic forms of social cooperation would prove impossible (cf. *De am.* §13, 203). It is easy to imagine why some minimal notion of friendship might be requisite to even the most restrictive and instrumental kinds of human community, but it would seem to be especially important in a large, heterogeneous, and increasingly stratified political society like Rome, where (as Cicero often lamented) class divisions had grown so intense that the possibility of realizing the *concordia* seemed increasingly remote (*De am.* §7, 189). Indeed, under such circumstances the unifying language of friendship is more necessary than ever, for it tends to mitigate hostility and discourage the demonization of one’s political

opponents. In so doing, it helps create an affective backdrop against which good faith negotiations and disagreements about the common good can take place. Thus it would seem that a pervasive friend-ly feeling is essential in political communities for its capacity to build bonds of trust and mutual respect while discouraging resentment and hostility. Serving these functions, it proves to be the enabling condition both of living and of living well (cf. *De am.* §18, 210).

However, the political promise of friendship extends beyond its capacity to inspire universal kindly feeling. Indeed, Cicero argues that as friendships grow more intensive they have cascading social consequences that support the *concordia* in at least three ways. The first is *motivational*: friends make us want to be better people, and in so doing they help unlock moral powers essential to good citizenship (e.g., *De am.* §21, 217). This process often works in a straightforward fashion, as when the presence of friends inspires us to act honorably or deters us from doing something shameful (e.g., *De am.* §8, 192–93), but a more important if less obvious social benefit of strong friendships is their ability to transform, imperceptibly but inevitably, our sense of what it means to live a good life. More than any other association they illuminate an uncertain future with “bright rays of hope,” thus expanding our sense of possibility and raising the moral expectations we have for ourselves (*De am.* §5, 189). These elevated expectations apply not only within the confines of our closest friendships but across the entire field of social interaction such that, as we learn to satisfy the increasingly rigorous requirements of our most intimate associations, our overall capacity for love expands and we find ourselves more able to treat all citizens with respect and concern. To this end, Laelius reports that his particularistic attachment to Scipio did not inhibit but rather *strengthened* his desire to show “fairness to one and all” (*De am.* §3, 181). Thus while Cicero harbors no illusions about all citizens participating together in intensive virtue friendships, he does argue that such associations serve to grow our ethical aspirations and affective capacities in ways that facilitate social concord.

Ciceronian friendship serves not only a motivational but also a *cognitive* function in a well-ordered polity, not only invigorating the will to act morally but also sharpening our judgment about what morality actually demands. It does so by providing a concrete context in which we gain practice deliberating about our everyday obligations (*De am.* §24, 221), learning the art of candor (*De am.* §24, 220–21), and distinguishing honest from dishonest people (*De am.* §17, 209). The development of all these skills is central to Cicero’s vision of republican citizenship, which requires citizens to have a working understanding of how to persuade and be persuaded as well as how to distinguish serious politicians from flatterers.¹³ While Laelius notes

¹³Daniel Kapust, *Flattery and the History of Political Thought: That Glib and Oily Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

that participation in close friendships helps us develop the good will (and thick skin) that all political societies require (e.g., *De am.* §24, 220), he puts special emphasis on how the process of vetting potential friends prepares us for public life. The failure to select trustworthy friends distorts our powers of judgment and leaves us susceptible to the hollow promises of would-be tyrants. His long discussion of the importance of honesty to friendship culminates in a political lesson that, as we shall see, would prove important to Machiavelli as well: public assemblies, he argues, must be able to “tell the difference between a demagogue ... and a statesman who is reliable and truthful and honest,” and friendship helps us make this crucial distinction (*De am.* §25, 222). In so doing, it undermines the tyrannical aims of ambitious elites who might be tempted to conceal their designs by flattering the people with the esteemed title of “friend.”¹⁴

Finally, intensive friendships produce *moral convergence* in precisely the way that the establishment of the *concordia* requires. If a consensualist political society is to function properly citizens must share a commitment to the same broad set of substantive moral values and possess a willingness to negotiate in good faith when there is disagreement about their policy implications. It is against this backdrop that Laelius praises friendship’s homogenizing capacity: he notes that he and Scipio “shared all the same interests” and enjoyed a “complete identity of feeling about all things in heaven and earth,” emphasizing in particular the “harmony between [them] on matters of state” (*De am.* §4, 184; §5, 187; §27, 227). Of course, Laelius knows it is unrealistic to expect others to attain the comprehensive concord he enjoyed with Scipio and will not even entertain the absurd possibility of all citizens becoming so similar, but he does emphasize that where friends *aspire* to enjoy an accord in all things, so too will their characters grow increasingly similar in ways that support the *concordia*.

Though Cicero emphasizes the ways in which both extensive and intensive friendships help allay political corruption, he also knew that the bonds of friendship which once held Rome together had long since eroded and, to the degree that they were present in the late republic, served primarily to destabilize political life (*De am.* §§12–13, 196–201). Knowledge of such dangers might have led another thinker to abandon a politics of friendship—indeed, we shall see that this is precisely what Machiavelli does—but Cicero’s conviction about the profound importance of friendship, coupled with his belief in man’s natural fitness for politics, prevents him from taking this tack. For Cicero, friendship is an object of political concern not only because it supports the *concordia* but also because it is itself a constituent component of the best human life. Its capacity to integrate the processes of public and private flourishing gives it a unique, and uniquely important,

¹⁴Daniel Kapust, *Republicanism, Rhetoric, and the History of Political Thought: Sallust, Livy, and Cicero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 112–13.

status in Cicero's political vision—it becomes both an instrument and an object of justice, something which supports good political institutions but also something which good political institutions must themselves support. If Cicero were to abandon the idea of a politics of friendship, so too would he be forced to abandon, or at least substantially qualify, his view of what it means to live politically with others. Since the experience of friendship is necessary to our flourishing, a regime which disconnected its practice from political life would sever the natural bond connecting individual and community, undermine the associational context in which social and civic virtue are developed, and cut off the road to true glory. It would also preclude the realization of the *concordia* because it removes the subpolitical supports that make meaningful political consensus possible. A political society that does not encourage the practice of friendship is thus not, properly speaking, a political society at all.

Friendship and the Common Good in the Civic Republican Tradition

Cicero's attempt to reveal the mutual complementarity of friendship and the *concordia* was extremely influential during the Renaissance era and especially in Florence, where political theorists drew on the ideal of friendship in order to develop their own visions of popular government and citizens used the terms *amici* and *amicizia* to describe the complex bonds which united them.¹⁵ Viroli has perceptively noted friendship's importance for *quattrocento* and *cinquecento* humanists and has persuasively argued that they saw the recovery of this ideal as part of a larger effort to rehabilitate the classical notion of the political community as a *civitas*. Thinkers as influential as Leonardo Bruni, Leon Batista Alberti, and Francesco Guicciardini are on Viroli's accounting deeply influenced by a broadly Ciceronian conception of politics which conceives of civic relations as a form of limited friendship and holds out the life of citizenship as the highest and best for human beings. The *civitas*, Viroli says, is not simply a "supplier of material needs" but is also a "humane community" in which citizens share a vision of the good life and, in their common pursuit of that vision, come to view each other in terms of "friendship."¹⁶ For Viroli, then, the writers of the Renaissance believed no less than did Cicero that a properly *political* community recognizes friendship as an essential aspect both of good citizenship and of human flourishing.

¹⁵Dale Kent, *Friendship, Love, and Trust in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁶Viroli, "Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics," 147–48, 151; cf. Neal Wood, *Cicero's Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 125–26.

After persuasively arguing that the classical ideal of friendship figured prominently into the political vision of Renaissance humanists, Viroli goes on to argue that Machiavelli endorsed that vision in its fullness: “if we consider how Machiavelli used the words *politico* and *civile*, we must conclude that he did not reject their conventional meanings. For him, the word *politico* is always linked with the familiar vocabulary of the *civitas* and never used against it.”¹⁷ In this he is joined by J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, who both, albeit in different ways,¹⁸ view Machiavelli as a traditional civic republican. The former sees the *Discourses* as “applying Aristotelian teleology to Roman ideas of *virtus*” and affirming the principle of man-as-*homo-politicus* while the latter holds that Machiavelli’s understandings of civic virtue and political corruption “very closely” track traditional ideas first developed by Cicero and other ancient Roman thinkers.¹⁹ Elsewhere, Skinner sums up his general view of Machiavelli by saying that he “is content to fit his ideas into a traditional framework” and that he “presents a wholeheartedly traditional defense of republican values ... in a wholeheartedly traditional way.”²⁰

If Machiavelli is as “whole-heartedly traditional” as the Cambridge School reading suggests, then we would expect him to provide an analysis of friendship’s capacity to realize the common good and mitigate political corruption, but in fact he never does provide any such discussion and, what is more, uses the terms “friend” and “friendship” to refer only to alliances and other relationships based on narrow self-interest (e.g., *P* 3, 5, 7, 8, 15, 19).²¹ This strongly suggests that, for Machiavelli, the concept “political friendship” denotes a purely instrumental association that has little if any civic functionality beyond the consolidation of power. Skinner and Viroli never discuss Machiavelli’s use of the term “friendship” or how it might affect his republicanism, nor do they provide any explicit discussion of friendship’s role in his political thought. These omissions, along with Machiavelli’s own rather

¹⁷Viroli, “Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics,” 152; cf. Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 154–77.

¹⁸There are important differences between Skinner and Pocock—Skinner views Machiavelli’s republicanism as grounded in Roman rather than Greek sources, and correctly recognizes Machiavelli’s denial of the premise of natural sociability (Quentin Skinner, “The Idea of Negative Liberty,” in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 217)—but as will become clear, these differences do not meaningfully bear on the present argument.

¹⁹Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 40, 164–65; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 164, 176.

²⁰Skinner, “Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*,” 138, 140; cf. Maher, “What Skinner Misses about Machiavelli’s Freedom.”

²¹Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Citations are to chapter numbers.

narrow view of friendship, certainly cast doubt on the Cambridge School attempt to make Machiavelli an orthodox civic republican, but they do not constitute a sufficient reason to reject it. Skinner and Viroli both note that Machiavelli departs from the civic republican tradition in ways that would tend to reduce his need to depend on a morally ambitious conception of friendship. To this end, they emphasize the importance of Machiavelli's novel analysis of the conflict between the plebs and the senate (*DL* 1.3–4)²² and find in his enthusiastic embrace of class conflict a radical critique of the Ciceronian *concordia*: “by arguing that the tumults represent a prime *cause* of freedom and greatness, Machiavelli is repudiating nothing less than the Ciceronian vision of the *concordia ordinum*.”²³ Insofar as an abandonment of a politics of friendship is implicit in Machiavelli's abandonment of the *concordia*—a suggestion borne out by my own analysis—Skinner and Viroli might be forgiven for failing to address the role of friendship in Machiavelli's thought.

It is, however, important to add that once Skinner and Viroli note Machiavelli's break with the civic republican tradition they go on to interpret it in the narrowest possible way, thus reopening the question of friendship's possible role. Skinner claims that Machiavelli celebrates the tumults because they “served to cancel out all sectional interests” and thereby guaranteed only those “enactments ... which benefited the community as a whole” while Viroli adds that “Machiavelli did not change the goal of politics, which remains the *vivere politico*; he tried however to argue that the *vivere politico* was not necessarily compatible with civic concord.”²⁴ Such claims are ostensibly intended to establish the proposition that Machiavelli's rejection of the *concordia* does not carry with it a further rejection of the traditional *civitas* and its civic culture of friendship and patriotic self-sacrifice, but rather may be read as an attempt to more effectively realize the ends already enshrined within it. Given this reading, Machiavelli may be understood to be engaged in a rather narrow kind of institutional reform project which, far from transforming the old conception of the common good, is instead motivated by an intention to realize it more fully. If Machiavelli's rejection of the *concordia* is indeed this narrow, we ought to find him appealing to friendship for many of the same reasons that Cicero did.

Unfortunately, however, Machiavelli's own discussion of the tumults does not bear this prediction out. Though he explicitly links his critique of the *concordia* to the theme of friendship, thus suggesting a connection between the two, he does so in order to *reject* both conceptions and, in so doing, to

²²Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Citations are to book, chapter, and page number.

²³Skinner, “Machiavelli's *Discorsi*,” 136, emphasis original; cf. Viroli, “Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics,” 160–61.

²⁴Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 1:181; Viroli, “Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics,” 160.

transform the notion of the common good. This connection first emerges at *DL* 1.4, where Machiavelli ironically refers to Cicero's *De amicitia* in order to establish the decidedly un-Ciceronian proposition that "the *disunion* of the plebs and the Roman Senate made that republic free and powerful" (16, emphasis added). Calling attention to Cicero's claim that "a public meeting consists of wholly inexperienced people; and yet, when gathered together, they can usually tell the difference between a demagogue ... and a statesman who is reliable," Machiavelli draws the lesson that "though peoples, as Tully says, are ignorant, they are capable of truth and easily yield when the truth is told them by a man worthy of faith" (*De am.* §25, 222; *DL* 1.4, 16–17). The context of this quote—like Machiavelli's choice to refer to a work on friendship in the midst of a paean to civil discord—turns out to be highly revealing: when Laelius makes this pronouncement, he is explaining how Scipio's speech to the assembly helped the Roman people see through Gaius Papirius Carbo's self-serving proposal to make the tribunes of the plebs eligible for re-election. Scipio's example is significant, however, because it reveals the more general point that citizens who participate in intensive virtue friendships learn to be wary of fawning politicians and help contribute to the construction of a more rational civic culture. For Cicero, then, the moral of the story is that friendship helps preserve a free way of life by improving practical judgment and cultivating interclass trust.

Machiavelli, however, understands the significance of this episode very differently. While also concerned about protecting popular liberty, he finds it necessary to turn Cicero's account inside out, arguing that it was not norms of friendship but rather class *conflict* that proved to be the hidden cause of Roman freedom. The Roman people, Machiavelli argues, remained free for as long as they did not because they trusted elites like Scipio but precisely because, as a general matter, they *did not*. Such pessimism about the motivations of the nobility, he goes on to say, is an indispensable guard of liberty, for though the "desires of free peoples are rarely pernicious to freedom," the elite taste for domination is a constant threat to republican orders and must be checked not only by formal institutions like the tribunes of the plebs but also by a civic culture animated by hostility, suspicion, and animosity. Machiavelli revels in characterizing the almost savage antagonism of this culture, celebrating the plebs' "extraordinary and almost wild" hostility toward the senate and noting the extreme, and often extralegal, measures that they took to assert themselves politically (e.g., repairing to the Sacred Mount). It is in this ferocious process of contestation, competition, and reformation—and *not* in the norms of good faith, cooperation, and broad social trust—that Machiavelli discovers the key to Roman greatness. In Machiavelli's Rome, then, there looks to be no room for any idea of friendship beyond narrowly instrumental intraclass alliances;²⁵ his critique of the

²⁵See McCormick, "Machiavellian Democracy," 302.

concordia has rendered superfluous both the extensive and intensive forms of friendship elegized by Cicero. Machiavelli's own discussion of the tumults thus reveals him to be engaged in a far a wider form of criticism than either Skinner or Viroli suggests. He rejects the *concordia* not merely as an institutional but also as a *cultural* ideal, and expresses skepticism that the norms of friendship which Cicero celebrates had anything at all to do with Rome's rise to greatness (*DL* 1.4, 16–17).

No attentive reader should be surprised by the breadth of Machiavelli's critique of Cicero, for in the preceding chapter he rejects the Ciceronian and Aristotelian belief in human-nature-as-*homo-politicus* and replaces it with a view that emphasizes man's irredeemable selfishness and aggressivity.²⁶ Unlike orthodox republicans who followed Cicero and Aristotle in stressing the natural compatibility of human ends, Machiavelli argues that human beings are endlessly acquisitive and that, as a consequence, their relations are intrinsically antagonistic: since "nature has created men so that they are able to desire everything and unable to attain everything," the basic and elemental condition of their existence is ferocious and ongoing competition rather than comity and friendship (*DL* 1.37, 78). The insatiability of human desire leads to conflicts of interest so extreme that the political situation is *defined* by competition. Such skepticism about human nature not only distinguishes Machiavelli from his civic republican predecessors but does so in a way that reveals why he turns away from the vision of social concord contained within the *concordia*: it is Machiavelli's belief in the overriding force of human selfishness which leads him to say that those "who dispose republics" must begin not from the premise of natural sociability as do Cicero and Aristotle but rather from the assumption "that all men are bad" (*DL* 1.3, 15). This pessimistic view of human nature is thus not only a philosophical but an "effectual" truth: it matters fundamentally for how we think about constitutional design and the possibilities of politics, and it rules out in advance an idea of social union as ambitious as Cicero's *concordia* (*P* 15).

Once we read Machiavelli's critique of the *concordia* in light of his rejections of the politics of friendship and the teleological theory of human nature, it becomes difficult to sustain the Cambridge School proposition that he affirmed the traditional conception of the common good. Indeed, Machiavelli diminishes the old notion of the common good in at least one obvious way when he removes friendship from its ambit, but this diminution is as significant for what it *reveals* as it is on its own. It shows that Machiavelli has a far more restrictive understanding of what goods are in fact common to human beings than do traditional civic republicans and, consequently, a far more limited notion of the goods which politics can instantiate. The good that is common to the citizens of a Machiavellian republic is established in spite of human nature and not because of it: it is an institutional

²⁶See Rahe, "Situating Machiavelli," 305.

output—the result of a prudent redirection of man’s deep and ineliminable self-love—not a deliberate aim of practical reason. As a consequence, it is rather narrow and realizable only where institutions turn the most basic human propensities against themselves. In this significant sense, Machiavelli’s common good is self-evidently different from traditional civic republican alternatives: it does not and cannot express the rational concord between like-minded citizens, reflect natural human fraternity, or instantiate love in the law. It does not reveal the natural complementarity of public and private good, and is shorn of the ideals that make the establishment of that complementarity possible. Machiavelli thus may have used the traditional vocabulary of common good, but when he theorizes it as an unintended consequence of vicious factional contestation and divorces it from the ideas of friendship and rational concord, he also drains it of its traditional content.

With this in mind, it is easy to see why Machiavelli’s contemporaries were, as Skinner himself notes, “horrified” by his critique of the *concordia*—they saw well enough that this denial was the logical consequence of his having already denied the entire network of assumptions about human nature, friendship, the common good, and political life that made belief in the *concordia* possible.²⁷ Interestingly, this shows Skinner and Viroli to have misunderstood not only why Machiavelli rejected the logic of consensualism but also why traditional civic republicans embraced it. To say that Machiavelli rejected the *concordia* but endorsed the old conception of the common good is to suggest that traditional civic republicans recognized a meaningful distinction between the two, but Cicero and his successors were committed to consensualist institutions not merely because they tended to generate good policy (i.e., produced “enactments” which happened to benefit “the community as a whole”) but also because they embodied shared convictions about the ends of public life. These convictions grounded an entire civic culture built upon the idea that human beings are political animals who cannot realize their authoritative good as persons unless they live under institutions that encourage them to search for rational consensus and unite them through norms of friendship. Thus to abandon the *concordia*—most especially for the reasons that Machiavelli does—is to abandon not only a set of formal institutions but also the ideals which those institutions embody.

The Danger of Friendship: Inequality and Deception

So far we have seen that Machiavelli rejects the traditional civic republican effort to reconcile politics and friendship and that this rejection carries with it a more circumscribed understanding of the common good. But Machiavelli rejects the politics of friendship not only for philosophical but also for *practical* reasons. On this point, it is important to note that the

²⁷Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 1:181.

language of friendship was a crucial part of the moral vocabulary in ancient Rome as well as in Renaissance Florence,²⁸ and was often deployed to consolidate hierarchical patronage structures which Machiavelli himself viewed as a threat to the long-term survival of republican orders.²⁹ With this in mind, it is unsurprising to find him arguing that the ideal of friendship does more harm than good in the public sphere because of its susceptibility to abuse. Of course, *all* political ideals may be manipulated for sinister purposes—something which leads Machiavelli to be circumspect about invoking them (e.g., *P* 15)—but the philosophical pedigree, intrinsic attractiveness, and egalitarian character of friendship combine to make it an especially useful pretext for those seeking to overturn republican orders while maintaining the appearance of virtue.

The concrete threat posed by the attempt to model civic relations on any ideal of friendship emerges with particular clarity at *DL* 1.46, where Machiavelli raises the question of political ambition. Quoting the Sallustian dictum that “all bad examples have arisen from good beginnings,” Machiavelli argues that “friendship” does not ameliorate but rather magnifies the problem of corrupt ambition because of its tendency to consolidate social power in the hands of a few:

Those citizens who live ambitiously in a republic, as was said above, seek as the first thing to be able not to be offended, not only by private individuals but also by the magistrates. They seek friendships [*lui e gli amici suoi*] in order to be able to do this; and they acquire them in ways honest in appearance. ... Because this appears virtuous, it easily deceives everyone, and because of this they offer no remedies against it, so that he, persevering without hindrance, becomes of such quality that private individuals have fear of him and the magistrates have respect for him. ... Hence a republic must have among its orders this one, of watching out that its citizens cannot do evil under the shadow of good. (*DL* 1.46, 95–96)

Machiavelli here points to how building “friendships” helps ambitious elites gain extralegal powers which, once acquired, could later be used to lock fellow citizens into relationships of asymmetric dependence. Clarke has astutely called attention to this same passage as a way of illustrating Machiavelli’s concerns about the traditional Roman virtue of *fides* and the hierarchical patron-client relations which it served to legitimate,³⁰ but the concepts of *fides* and *amicitia* were both central to ancient Roman (and

²⁸Kent, *Friendship, Love and Trust*, 11; John Najemy, *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513–1515* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 21.

²⁹Clarke, “Virtues of Republican Citizenship”; Karl Hölskeskamp, *Reconstructing the Roman Republic: An Ancient Political Culture and Modern Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³⁰Clarke, “Virtues of Republican Citizenship,” esp. 320–24.

Renaissance Florentine) moral practice and were commonly deployed together in order to consolidate bonds of solidarity and trust across class lines. And since Machiavelli himself uses the language of *friendship*, he is suggesting that what is true of *fides* is also true of *amicitia*: the Ciceronian ideal becomes a mere illusion or “shadow of good” that serves to cloak the pernicious designs of ambitious elites, who build “friendships” in *seemingly* honest ways but abandon them as soon as they are able. Claiming to serve the public good while in fact serving their own, the ambitious dispense favors in order to extract rents and speak the language of friendship in order to lock the desperate and credulous into disempowering forms of dependence. Such deception, Machiavelli adds, is accomplished “easily” because an unsuspecting public will inevitably be seduced by those who “appear virtuous” but are not. Since the ideal of friendship can provide only the appearance or “shadow” of public utility, republics—far from cultivating belief in it—must instead be on their guard against its emergence: a civic culture rooted in norms of friendship cannot preserve popular liberty because it will inevitably track the class interests of political and social elites.

Attention to the context of Machiavelli’s remark at *DL* 1.46 deepens his critique of the politics of friendship by pointing to two examples of elites using the language of friendship in order to enlarge their own social power. The first is Appius Claudius, a “sagacious and restless” member of the first decemvirate whose example Machiavelli treats in the chapters which immediately precede the remark about friendship (*DL* 1.40–45). Appius’s rise, Machiavelli notes, was noteworthy because, after a career of cruelly persecuting the plebs, he feigned friendship with them in order to win their favor, and then used his influence with the people to gain power over the other decemvirs (*DL* 1.40, 86). Both Livy and Machiavelli call attention to the suspicious suddenness of Appius’s moral transformation and remark that the other decemvirs knew that something was amiss: noting that Appius “had taken on a new nature” very quickly, they began to doubt that “in such great arrogance friendship would be spontaneous” (*DL* 1.40, 88; cf. *Hist.* 3.35). Machiavelli has already taught us that an appropriately vigilant people would have known to disbelieve Appius’s claims to be a friend of the people, but trust him they did, and to their own detriment. After securing an unprecedented second term as a decemvirate, Appius quickly “put an end to playing an alien persona” and began to “terrify” the very plebs who had helped secure his power (*DL* 1.40, 86–87; cf. *Hist.* 3.36). In the following chapter, Machiavelli reverses his perspective and considers things from Appius’s point of view, and there he actually praises the “astuteness” of the would-be tyrant in deceiving the plebs but criticizes him for changing his character too quickly. He makes his point by once again recurring to the language of friendship: Appius might well have been successful in his attempted coup if he had revealed “the falsity of his spirit” more slowly, but because he changed his “nature all of a sudden” and morphed “from a friend of the plebs ... [into] an enemy” (*di amico mostrarsi inimico alla plebe*)

he lost his authority over the people and became politically isolated. Stripped of his popular support, Appius found himself “without friends” (*sanza amici*) and thus without political prospects (*DL* 1.41, 90). Though Appius ultimately failed (for all kinds of reasons: see, e.g., *DL* 1.44), the reason why his case is noteworthy is that whatever success he had was the result of his ability to deceive the plebs in the name of friendship (*DL* 1.40, 88).

Machiavelli also alludes to the example of Catiline through his explicit reference to Sallust’s *De coniuratione Catilinae*. When we follow Machiavelli’s prompt to consult Sallust’s text we once again find friendship doing “evil under the shadow of good,” with Catiline assembling a coterie of dissolute and debt-ridden “friends and allies” in order to seize control of the state (*Cat.* 16.4).³¹ Sallust emphasizes that Catiline used a variety of persuasive techniques to attract clients, sometimes appealing to their basest interests and urges but other times deploying the language of virtue and friendship to describe the nobility of their shared enterprise (*Cat.* 14.4–7, 20.2–17). Thus he was through a perverse combination of flattery, false good will, and financial assistance able to “make [others] dependent on him and faithful to him” (*Cat.* 14.6–7). Sallust’s discussion of Catiline’s friendships very closely tracks Machiavelli’s own concerns about elites disingenuously appealing to shared ideals in order to lock citizens into relationships of asymmetric dependence, and also reveals a perhaps surprising sensitivity to the corrosive effects of structural inequality. On this score, Sallust notes that Catiline’s coconspirators, though thoroughly corrupted from a moral point of view, were also saddled with debt and, owing to their dire economic circumstances, were highly vulnerable to the depredations and empty promises of ambitious elites like Catiline (e.g., *Cat.* 14.2, 18.4, 21.1). Thus although Sallust is more sympathetic to the idea of a politics of friendship than is Machiavelli (e.g., *Cat.* 9.5), he and Machiavelli both recognize how asymmetries in economic and social power create conditions which allow elites to manipulate and exploit rank-and-file citizens in the name of shared ideals.

Machiavelli thus may be understood to reduce the question of the politics of friendship into one of elite manipulation and to argue that nobles who appeal to the ideal of friendship do so merely in order to amass political and social influence. In arguing thus, he completely inverts the meaning of the very passage from *De amicitia* which he cites in *DL* 1.4: where Cicero argues that friendship can help citizens identify corrupt elites by sharpening their consciousness of the virtues and improving their practical judgment, Machiavelli claims that those who believe in the ideal of friendship will be too quick to trust and thus too “easily” deceived by would-be tyrants. To the degree this is true, norms of political friendship catalyze rather than combat corruption both by providing the ambitious with more occasions

³¹Sallust, *Catiline’s Conspiracy, The Jurgurthine War, Histories*, trans. William Batstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

for deception and by rendering the people more susceptible to being deceived.

Conclusions

Machiavelli inherited a republican tradition which viewed friendship and politics as deeply complementary practices, with friendship supporting social concord by inculcating the feelings and virtues necessary to its realization while political institutions supported friendship by providing it with an authoritative moral horizon. This broad complementarity was made possible by a teleological view of human nature which held that human beings could realize their authoritative ends as persons if, *and only if*, they inhabited a community united by norms of friendship. I have argued that Machiavelli's own brand of republicanism not only abandons but also actively criticizes this traditional view. Against the tradition, Machiavelli denies the complementarity of friendship and politics because he denies both the teleological assumptions that make that complementarity possible and the consensualist aspirations that make it necessary. So too does he emphasize the dangers of importing the ideal of friendship into the public sphere for which it is so ill suited, arguing that ambitious elites looking to acquire social influence will use the language of friendship as a way of concealing and of executing their tyrannical designs.

My novel focus on the theme of friendship has emphasized Machiavelli's philosophical originality as well as the way in which he lowers the horizons of politics.³² Like many writers of the Italian Renaissance, Machiavelli deeply admired the republican regimes of antiquity and wished to instill in his audience a proper appreciation for classical politics, but in his own writings he claimed to have found "new modes and orders" quite unlike anything known to the ancient world. My study of friendship reveals that Machiavelli's originality stems in part from his having freed himself from an entire network of assumptions about human nature and political life that makes norms of friendship necessary to the preservation of a free way of life, and highlights the way in which his decoupling of friendship and politics anticipates attempts by later and more self-consciously modern authors to found politics upon a basis of self-love rather than rational sociability.

Viewing Machiavelli's republicanism through the lens of friendship serves to highlight its distinctiveness and, in so doing, tends to distance it from the civic republican tradition to which he is often said to belong. An important

³²See, e.g., Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Vickie B. Sullivan, "Machiavelli's Momentary 'Machiavellian Moment': A Reconsideration of Pocock's Treatment of the Discourses," *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 309–18; Rahe, "Situating Machiavelli."

benefit of focusing on the theme of friendship is that it allows us to see that Machiavelli actually rejects the Aristotelian vision of human nature that Pocock places at the foundation of his thought;³³ that his reasons for embracing social discord and class tumults are far more radical than either Skinner or Viroli have claimed; and that, far from trying to realize the traditional common good in a new way, he is instead fundamentally altering—and diminishing—the traditional idea of the common good itself. He rejects the politics of friendship because he rejects the traditional view of human-nature-as-*homo-politicus*, and this rejection carries with it an attempt to transform the civic culture of republicanism from a teleologically ordered site of shared purposes into a tumultuous contestational space in which citizens vent their natural antagonism.

In addition to emphasizing Machiavelli's novel and aim-attenuated vision of politics, my analysis supports a strongly democratic reading of Machiavelli pioneered by McCormick and reveals him to be deeply concerned about asymmetric dependence and the political effects of structural inequality. Like Clarke, who traces Machiavelli's critique of *fides* back to its tendency to reinforce clientelistic relations which systematically subject some to the power of others, I have emphasized the way in which seemingly beneficial moral ideals become tools of oppression once they are imported into the public sphere: civic republicans who imported the concept of fraternity into the public sphere succeeded only in reinforcing patterns of domination and servility that eventually undermine republican orders. On this point, Maher has persuasively argued that Machiavelli was concerned with the way in which elites deployed extralegal or informal power in order to amass social influence and that he viewed these modes as especially noxious to republics because of the difficulty of regulating them through formal institutional means. On her accounting, the practice of patronage which was so common to the Roman and Renaissance Florentine worlds undermined the idea that "reputation is achieved only through acts done for the common benefit" and replaced it with "a world in which material well-being and social status were sought through private modes ... rather than through law and public modes."³⁴ I have shown that Machiavelli was concerned not only about the privatization of social power but also about the way in which it was legitimated, and it is in this context that his critique of the ideal of friendship has the greatest relevance. Viewed through his cynical eyes, friendship does not serve the public good but rather does evil under its shadow.

³³Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 40, 156, 165.

³⁴Maher, "What Skinner Misses about Machiavelli's Freedom," 1009; cf. *DL* 3.28.