

Erica Benner. *Machiavelli's Ethics*.

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Erica Benner's *Machiavelli's Ethics* is an elegantly written, beautifully produced, but excessively long book inquiring into Machiavelli's philosophical approach to politics. The study is built around three main arguments. First, it makes a case for Machiavelli being regarded as a moral and political philosopher. Second, it contends that his political theory shows a strong commitment to the rule of

law and legality in general. Third, it argues that his outlook owes more to ancient Greek philosophy than has generally been acknowledged. The first claim is hardly remarkable, since most Machiavelli scholars are likely to agree that the Florentine is a political philosopher of the first order. The two other arguments raise important questions concerning what kind of political philosophy Machiavelli espouses.

At the center of Brenner's investigation is Machiavelli's understanding of virtue and his view of Roman expansionism. According to Brenner, Machiavellian virtue, or *virtù*, is basically Aristotelian virtue. Its chief characteristics are self-restraint, moderation, and respect for due limits, and it can, understood as a mean, err both on the side of over-assertiveness and under-assertiveness (154). A key term in Machiavelli's vocabulary is the enigmatic expression *una eccessiva virtù*, which Brenner views as an ironic contradiction in terms, and associates with a way of proceeding that fails to respect due constraints, exceeds "the limits of prudential action" (215), and falls back on "brute self-assertion" (220). We thus frequently get to hear about how Rome during its long and tumultuous rise to world domination "overstepped virtuous limits" (216), and about how Machiavelli expresses "implicit reproach" (472) and "dissimulates admiration" (475) for Roman expansionism. The fact that Machiavelli explicitly and unambiguously adduces the Roman example as a healthy contrast to the modern republics of Florence and Venice, which he accuses of having committed the sin of over-expansion (*Discorsi* 2.19), is passed over in silence. The reason Rome had been able to benefit from its conquests, Machiavelli explains, was that it had prudently laid a strong foundation for its growing power.

The term *eccessiva* appears approximately ten times in the *Discourses*. Among those passages, there is only one in which Machiavelli uses it in a way that supports Brenner's claim (in *Discorsi* 1.40 he speaks of the senate's "eccessiva voglia" to eliminate the tribunes of the plebs). On two occasions (*Discorsi* 1.19; *Discorsi* 2.2; cfr. *The Prince*, chap. 2), Machiavelli employs the expression *eccessiva virtù* to denote simply a greater force, without suggesting over-assertiveness on the part of the force in question. His comment in *Discorsi* 2.4 on how Rome rose to "tanta eccessiva potenza" is admittedly open to interpretation, if one insists on viewing Machiavelli's consistent praise of Roman expansionism as a conventional literary trope. This leaves us with at least six instances, where Machiavelli uses the expression *eccessiva virtù* or *eccessiva potenza* in an empathically and unequivocally positive sense. In *Discorsi* 1.55, he calls for a kingly hand, who, with *la potenza assoluta ed eccessiva*, can put a rein on the *eccessiva* ambition and corrupt ways of the powerful. Later in book 3, which deals the role of the virtuous individual in Roman history, the military captains, Manlius Torquatus (*Discorsi* 3.19), and Scipio Africanus and Hannibal (*Discorsi* 3.21–22), are lauded for having maintained discipline and achieved great things by means of *una eccessiva virtù*. Finally, Machiavelli in a memorable passage in *Discorsi* 3.1 argues that Rome for centuries managed to stave off corruption by at certain intervals returning to its beginnings, or first principles. One recommended way of restoring the republic's original goodness

(*bontà*) consisted in the execution of a law or an order. As examples of such restorative actions by legal means, Machiavelli adduces a series of spectacular killings, which, due to their “excessive and notable” character, had the effect of imprinting fear and terror in the memory of men, and to inducing them to leave their corrupt ways and to “return to the mark.” To read this recommendation at other than face value would render this important chapter, and indeed, the whole *Discourses*, absurd.

In short, in Machiavelli’s vocabulary *eccessiva* denotes something capable of overcoming and imposing itself on an opposing force or the matter at hand. It is a rare, but highly laudable, quality. The charge of over-assertiveness is Brenner’s invention and misses Machiavelli’s point completely. This illustrates one of the major shortcomings of this book: its disregard for detail and lack of interpretative precision. Machiavelli’s works are from a textual point of view far more complex, rhetorically charged, and historically embedded than Brenner wants to acknowledge.

Since so much in this study hinges on the claim that Machiavelli sported a Greek, and ultimately Aristotelian, notion of virtue, based on an ideal of moderation and self-restraint, Brenner’s misinterpretation of *eccessiva virtù* signals a major flaw in her overall line of reasoning. It unravels the whole argument about Machiavelli’s alleged preference for Greek philosophy over Roman power politics, his supposedly critical view of Roman imperialism and expansionism in general, his position on the few and the many, the role he ascribes to the exceptional individual within his republic, etc. It provides an example of how this book skillfully manages to skirt the surface of Machiavelli’s text without seriously engaging his argument, imposing on it a philosophical outlook that bears strong imprints of Kantian, Arendtian, and Habermasian concerns, but on the whole is foreign to Machiavelli. As a consequence, Brenner fails to take seriously the challenge that the Florentine author poses to conventional ethics, common sense logic, and modern pieties. The result is a nicely packaged, but disappointingly ordinary, and sadly truncated, Machiavelli.

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