

## Translator's Introduction: Unscripted Space, Devoured Time

Vittorio Morfino's *Il tempo e l'occasione: l'incontro Spinoza-Machiavelli* constitutes a decisive intervention for contemporary studies of Spinoza. Owing in part to Spinoza's apparent paucity of references to Machiavelli, Spinoza's relation to him has often implicitly been treated as occasional: perhaps the two share some affinities for realist or anti-utopian political positions, with Spinoza taking up certain Machiavellian or Machiavellian-like insights, but the relation does not go beyond this point. This book challenges such assumptions by demonstrating a connection between Spinoza and Machiavelli as specific as it is pervasive, arguing that Spinoza's understanding of causality in the *Ethics* owes much to his study of Machiavelli's writings on history and politics, a claim with multiple implications for Spinoza's own views on history and politics as well as temporality. Morfino succinctly treats different approaches to the Spinoza–Machiavelli question in the introduction, and I will not rehearse them here.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I will briefly recapitulate the main steps in his overall analysis in order to frame it in terms of the object alluded to in the title of the book – Spinoza's encounter with Machiavelli.

After synthetically summarising different approaches to the Spinoza–Machiavelli question throughout the twentieth century in the introduction, Morfino proceeds to carry out four steps in the remainder of the text. First, in chapter 1, through close examination of Spinoza's own library, Morfino delivers a clear and thorough framework of the possible means through which Spinoza read Machiavelli. His analysis shows that Spinoza had multiple access points to the Florentine's work: Machiavelli's complete works in Italian (which Spinoza seemed capable of understanding, given the presence of an Italian–Spanish dictionary in his library, as well as an Italian–

<sup>1</sup> One notable exception to this implicit consensus is Del Lucchese 2009, which had not been published when Morfino wrote this book.

language monograph), a Latin translation of *The Prince*, and discussions of Machiavelli in texts of Bacon, Descartes and others. Morfino is careful to note that these basic facts, of course, do not necessarily mean that Spinoza studied Machiavelli in these ways, or only in these ways, since such information cannot speak to the practical aspects of reading or other kinds of study. As such, in addition to his detailed account of these possible means, Morfino outlines Spinoza's general approach to citation, where proper names are rare, and together with impersonal figures (such as the 'theologians and metaphysicians' in the appendix to *Ethics* I), negative, except for a remark about ancient atomists in a letter to Hugo Boxel.<sup>2</sup> Morfino then considers Spinoza's direct citations of the 'ever shrewd'<sup>3</sup> Machiavelli.

Both of the latter two elements also contribute to Morfino's extensive analysis of the *Theological-Political Treatise* and *Political Treatise* in chapter 2. He does this through the rubric of 'Machiavelli's implicit presence', by which he does not intend an esoteric reading of Spinoza's work, showing some kind of secret fidelity to an atemporal Machiavellianism. Instead, again undertaking a precise and painstaking labour, Morfino demonstrates substantive links between arguments within Spinoza's political works and Machiavelli's texts, above all *Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince*. Some key aspects that Morfino outlines in this chapter, which simultaneously constitutes a kind of mini-treatise on Spinoza's political works, include the decisiveness of Machiavelli's conceptual pair 'virtue' and 'fortune' for Spinoza's discussion of election in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and the deployment of Machiavelli's remarks on keeping pacts in the framework of natural law theory, especially in contrast to Hobbes. In the unfinished *Political Treatise*, Morfino outlines Machiavelli's presence in what he terms the 'skeletal structure' of the text, emphasising the idea that *imperium* represents a momentary equilibrium of forces, rather than a model of politics where civil society names a stabilised transcendence of the state of nature.

Third, Morfino draws out the consequences of his reconstruction of Spinoza's use of Machiavellian arguments even more fully, in what are undoubtedly some of the most exciting pages in the book. A full reckoning with these details is best left to the text itself, but we can note here that the consequences Morfino uncovers are especially relevant for Spinoza's concepts of causality and eternity, and by extension, for how to think Spinoza's political works in tandem with the *Ethics*. The idea at the heart of the chapter is that Spinoza's encounter with Machiavelli's approach to history and

<sup>2</sup> Ep. LVI [to Hugo Boxel]; CWS II, 423–4

<sup>3</sup> TP V, 7; CWS II, 531.

politics bears its most dazzling traces in the structure of Spinoza's account of common notions and the third kind of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In a famous passage on teleological prejudice in the appendix to *Ethics* I, Spinoza lists mathematics as what provides a standard of truth that breaks the circle between human experience and the inscrutability of levels of divine providence and will.<sup>5</sup> Morfino both cautions against reading the passage from superstition to science, or imagination to reason, as a necessary law, and suggests that mathematics be understood a singular event among others.

In the same passage, Spinoza also remarks that other causes break with teleological prejudice and lead to true knowledge of things, but does not list them. Morfino suggests that these causes are physics and political theory. Based on Spinoza's remark that the causes are unnecessary to enumerate 'here', Morfino further suggests that Spinoza has written or will write about these causes elsewhere. If Spinoza discusses physics in the short treatise of *Ethics* II, it is less clear that he discusses political theory in the same way, even though many readers have productively utilised material from the *Ethics* in this sense, especially parts three and four. However, Morfino argues that 'there are two specific passages where, more strictly than elsewhere, Spinoza traces a line of demarcation between the teleological knowledge of history and politics and the knowledge of the essence and characteristics of the political body – that is, between the imaginary sanctification of history and power, and the knowledge of their dynamics'.<sup>6</sup> These passages are *TTP* III, where Spinoza uses the Machiavellian concepts of virtue and fortune in his conceptual critique of the election of the Hebrew people, and the opening of *TP* I, where Spinoza differentiates himself from theorists of reason of state, emphasising a need for what we could call, with some simplification, political realism.

Machiavelli stands out as the point of departure for both of these political critiques of teleological prejudice. On the basis of the hypothesis that physics and political theory also constitute ways of breaking with imagination and superstition, Morfino proceeds to further argue that these ways of knowing are also helpful for thinking about one of the most difficult problems in Spinoza's work, the third kind of knowledge or intuitive science. Following

<sup>4</sup> I have referred generically to Machiavelli's 'approach' to history and politics, partly in keeping with the broad engagement to Machiavelli's work that Morfino exhibits. For a useful recent collection of texts on Machiavelli, see Del Lucchese, Frosini and Morfino (eds) 2015.

<sup>5</sup> *Ethics* I, App.; CWS I, 441–2.

<sup>6</sup> Page 122 below.

Machiavelli and a number of others including Aristotle, Morfino emphasises a parallelism between medicine and politics. Intuitive science thus concerns adequate knowledge of a singular physical body or adequate knowledge of a singular social body.

These arguments are best considered in their full detail in chapter 3, but two further insights which undergird this section of Morfino's analysis concern causality and eternity. Morfino claims that one of the most fundamental effects of Spinoza's encounter with Machiavelli is a shift in his conception of causality, from a serial and linear understanding in his early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* to an immanent and structural understanding in the *Ethics*, as well as implicitly in several passages of the *TTP* and *TP*. An important corollary to these arguments is a claim concerning Spinoza's 'anti-humanist' conception of eternity, which treats eternity not as a totalising concept, but rather as a principle of intelligibility for the connection of durations that make up the temporal fabric of being.<sup>7</sup> 'As such', Morfino concludes, 'eternity forbids the conception of history as both a straight line and a cycle, in order to open on to an anti-humanistic conception of eternity as the aleatory interweaving of necessity, an eternity that does not impose any binary as obligatory for history.'<sup>8</sup>

In this way, the fourth and final step of the overall argument takes on the idea of philosophy of history, in order to examine a possible general way of reading Spinoza and Machiavelli. Morfino thus begins the final chapter by sketching a basic orientation that extends beyond Spinoza's encounter with Machiavelli, or arguments in the texts of either. Morfino analyses two thinkers who have proposed such readings: Lessing in the case of Spinoza's *TTP*, and Vico in the case of a combination of Machiavellian and Spinozist insights. The chapter is organised around a refusal to conceive history as a univocal stream of time, flowing towards the progressive realisation of necessary, universal knowledge. The examinations of both Lessing and Vico thus serve as models that further specify the stakes of a general approach to Spinoza and Machiavelli, and Morfino reconstructs their readings in order to highlight the implications of extracting a philosophy of history from them. He concludes that instead of such a picture of history, what the Spinoza–Machiavelli encounter urges is knowledge of the singular connection particular to an object. In the case of a historical object, it is this model that Spinoza's *TTP* and Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* exemplify.

<sup>7</sup> The material throughout this chapter constitutes some elements of what Morfino will later develop as the theory of plural temporality. See Morfino 2014, especially 132–73.

<sup>8</sup> Page 158 below.

If such a refusal of a general philosophy of history constitutes one of the key implications at the intersection of Spinoza's and Machiavelli's philosophy, one thing that remains somewhat opaque is the question of exactly in what their encounter consists. While it should not prevent us from wagering yet more hypotheses on the basis of careful examination of their work, specificity in this regard is fraught with difficulties. Morfino suggests thinking their encounter as necessarily plural, involving some of the materials he excavates at the outset of the argument, and perhaps more encounters devoured by time.<sup>9</sup> The Spinoza–Machiavelli encounter is also plural if we judge it by the results of the book in your hands: in addition to the historical material that Morfino excavates, he offers an extensive discussion of key arguments across Spinoza's work, new insights regarding the content of Spinoza's understanding of causality, and an appreciation for how it is interwoven in key moments of Spinoza's mature work. As such, a productive response to the material in *The Spinoza–Machiavelli Encounter* lies not in searching for the origin of the unscripted space opened up by this book, but rather in the challenges and uses it presents for Spinoza scholarship and contemporary philosophy. One aspect of such a programme might be the displacement of the ideological couple 'origin' and 'end' for the pair 'encounter' and 'relation'. Spinoza's relation to Machiavelli is thus indeed an occasional one, provided we understand an occasion in the same sense as the Florentine secretary. In a history abounding with occasions, the existence of such unscripted space is necessary. What continues to be left to chance is the efficacy of relations between encounters that have taken hold, as so many footholds for finding balance in a history without guarantees.

<sup>9</sup> Although it is not explicitly conceptualised in this book, one understanding of the encounter that bears a strong affinity to the suggestions raised by its arguments is Althusser's unfinished manuscript (2006). See Morfino 2014: 89–112.