A Crisis of Relativism: Leo Strauss on Machiavelli, Aristotle, and the Modern Failure to Understand Tyranny

WYATT HILL

As a twentieth-century scholar of classical and modern political philosophy, Leo Strauss was deeply concerned by the interrelated threats of political tyranny and intellectual debilitation, which constitute what he refers to as "the crisis of our time."[1] In tracing the philosophical origins of modern tyranny, Strauss interprets Niccolò Machiavelli as precipitating this crisis through his novel fixation on the "extreme situation," undermining the possibility of political philosophy as "the attempt to truly know…the right, or the good, political order."[2] Crowning Machiavelli as "the founder of modern political philosophy,"[3]

Wyatt Hill is a PhD student in Politics in the Institute of Philosophic Studies at the University of Dallas. In 2021, he received a BA in Political Science and History from Austin College. His areas of interest include American Political Thought, Constitutional Law, and the development of modern political philosophy.

[1] Leo Strauss, "Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time," in *The Post-Behavioral Era*, eds. George J. Graham and George W. Carey (New York: David McKay, 1972), 217-242.
[2] Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 12.
[3] Ibid., 40.

Strauss contrasts Machiavelli's thought with the works of Aristotle to illustrate the origins of modernity's failure to understand and properly condemn tyranny.[4] By understanding the origins of this modern failure, we may relearn "what tyranny is" and engage in "an exact analysis of present day tyranny…."[5] Since "tyranny is a danger coeval with political life,"[6] the need to recognize and confront despotism is inescapably relevant to the human experience.

Strauss begins his treatment of Machiavelli by underscoring Machiavelli's connection to what Strauss refers to as the "extreme situation."[7] According to Strauss, the classic philosophers base their understanding of politics on man's experience in the communal, ordered state which makes up the temporal bulk of political life.[8] In the works of Aristotle, this understanding leads to a teleological treatment of political life informed by "what is normally right," with the "statesman in the Aristotelian sense" reluctantly deviating from this standard only in grave circumstances[9] In contrast, Strauss interprets Machiavelli basing his understanding of civil society on the experiences of human beings during the incipient stages of political orders. For, although these founding periods constitute a temporally miniscule portion of human life, Strauss asserts that Machiavelli believes that they are more revealing of the true character of civil society.[10] Given this novel orientation toward the exception, the Machiavellian statesman takes an indifferent, utilitarian view of the Aristotelian standard of conduct. For, while Aristotelian virtue may be desirable in the temporal bulk of circumstances, the ever-present possibility of an "extreme situation," in which "the demands of justice are reduced to the requirements of necessity,"[11] demands that rulers be able and willing to depart from classical morality. Thus undermining the notion of a transcendent standard altogether, Machiavelli's focus on the "extreme situation" lays

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[4] Leo Strauss, "On Tyranny," in *On Tyranny: Corrected and Expanded Edition,* ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 23.

[5] Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 95. ; Leo Strauss, "On Tyranny," 22.

[6] Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 22.

[7] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 163.

[8] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 47.

[9] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 162.

[10] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 179.

[11] Ibid., 163.

the groundwork for the modern revolt against classical thought which, in Strauss' lifetime, culminated in the contemporary failure to condemn tyranny as such.[12]

I.   MACHIAVELLI'S DECOUPLING OF MORALITY AND POLITICS

In concert with his evaluation of Machiavelli's fixation on the extreme, Strauss places Machiavelli at the genesis of modernity by discussing Machiavelli's understanding of man's most primitive state. According to Strauss, Aristotle understands man as "a political animal,"[13] naturally inclined toward community in order to better fulfill his needs. Breaking away from this understanding, Machiavelli presents humans as naturally selfish, asocial creatures who are unwilling to enter society in the absence of external compulsion.[14] While Aristotle understands man's political condition in light of his natural capacity to strive toward "the most perfect…union with his fellows,"[15] Machiavelli understands politics in light of man's propensity for vice.[16] When coupled with his focus on the extreme, Strauss argues, Machiavelli's "anti-idealistic view" of the origins of civil society shapes the modern manifestation of tyranny by undermining the relationship between morality and politics altogether.[17]

Providing context for his discussion of Machiavelli's departure from earlier understandings of human nature, Strauss frames the classical understanding of politics within the Aristotelian notion that, in terms of moral virtue, both rulers and subjects are "obliged to act justly under all circumstances."[18] According to Strauss, Machiavelli rejects this classical notion as wholly unrealistic and contends that the very possibility of morality depends upon the constructive immorality of political founders.[19] As man must be compelled to adopt the public-spiritedness necessary for society to exist, incipient societies depend upon the multitude's fear-driven obedience of a particularly vicious individual who, in pursuit of lasting glory, seeks to make men tolerably

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[12] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 95.

[13] Ibid., 156.

[14] Ibid., 178-179.

[15] Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 17.

[16] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178-179.

[17] Ibid., 178.

[18] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 140.

[19] Ibid., 179.

good.[20] Consequently, by publicizing a political teaching centered around the "inherence of immorality in the foundation of society,"[21] Machiavelli further undermines the possibility of any transcendent standard by which to understand political life.

Given Machiavelli's emphasis on the amoral origins of political life, Strauss belabors the consequences of Machiavelli's thinking by discussing the startling differences between Aristotelian and Machiavellian statesmanship. As previously stated, the classical understanding of politics begins with "what is normally right,"[22] such that political prudence cannot exist without moral virtue. In contrast, Machiavelli's fixation on the "extreme situation" leads him to emphasize the dangerous limitations of adhering to any standard other than expediency.[23] As Strauss so keenly observes, Machiavelli indeed "rewrites…Aristotle's *Ethics*"[24] by treating Aristotelian virtue and vice as equally acceptable approaches to various situations that arise in political life. Wholeheartedly rejecting the notion that classical virtue might be an end in itself, Machiavelli makes a near mockery of Aristotle's thought by proposing his own understanding of statesman-like *virtú* legitimizing "the vices that enable a prince to rule."[25] Thus overturning the Aristotelian distinction between the "good man" and the "good citizen," Machiavelli reduces "goodness" to a plebian trait while extolling his *virtú* as the results-oriented utilization of either virtue or vice depending upon what a given situation requires.[26]

Recognizing the implications of Machiavelli's scathing criticism of morality, Strauss credits Machiavelli with having much influence on the aspirations of modern political life. As an outgrowth of their teleological understanding of politics, the ancients consider the "best regime" as one which strives toward "the virtue of its members."[27] But, while the ancients assign great importance to such considerations, they

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[20] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 43.

[21] Ibid., 44.

[22] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 162.

[23] Ibid., 178-179.

[24] Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 214.

[25] Ibid., 214.

[26] Ibid., 215.

[27] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 31.

nonetheless recognize the improbable nature of the "best regime," given that, as Aristotle himself acknowledges, "moral virtue in the full sense is not within the reach of all men."[28] Accordingly, as Strauss observes, the ancients uphold "the best political order"[29] as an ideal which, although remotely possible, is unlikely to come into being in the absence of exceedingly good fortune.

But while the ancients are willing to balance their contemplation of the "best regime" with a realistic understanding of human political life, Machiavelli's understanding of morality and politics leads him to reject such "imagined kingdoms"[30] as wholly unrealistic. Indeed, Strauss interprets Machiavelli as seeking to conquer chance by casting aside any improbable aspirations toward communal virtue.[31] Aiming instead for those baser objectives which men are naturally inclined to pursue, Machiavelli clears the way for the modern notion that political orders exist to provide security and material prosperity, irrespective of the moral character of their members.[32] Accordingly, Strauss argues that Machiavelli's fixation on the exigencies of the "extreme situation" make Machiavelli the first to publicly defend an understanding of politics which, being "guided exclusively by considerations of expediency,"[33] has a profound effect on contemporary tyranny.

II.   MACHIAVELLI'S INFLUENCE ON THE NATURE OF MODERN TYRANNY

In addition to discussing Machiavelli's lowering of moral aspirations, Strauss also identifies Machiavelli's wide-reaching influence on the whole of modern thought. In the works of seventeenth-century theorists, for instance, Strauss discerns a "hidden kinship"[34] between Machiavelli's thought and the development of modern natural science. escribing man as naturally asocial, Machiavelli's thought influences thinkers like Thomas Hobbes,[35] whose "state of nature" theory alienates man from his

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[28] Ibid., 40.

[29] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 15.

[30] Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 213.

[31] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178.

[32] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 178. ; Strauss, *The City and Man*, 32.

[33] Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 211.

[34] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 47.

[35] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 61n22.; Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy*, 47.

fellows to such an extreme degree that moral behavior need not apply. [36]
In light of this "hidden kinship," Strauss reasons, the state of nature
operates in much the same way that modern natural science, isolating
various facets of the natural world, seeks to conquer nature through
controlled experiments.[37] Although such aspirations had been rejected by
the ancients as "destructive to humanity,"[38] man's self-understanding as
"master and owner of nature"[39] would become a central tenet of the
modern project.[40] By establishing Machiavelli's "hidden kinship" with
such later scientific endeavors, Strauss once again strengthens the
connection between Machiavelli's "extreme case" and those elements of
modernity which had a significant influence on twentieth-century
tyranny.

Strauss also connects Machiavelli with the similarly problematic
idea of unlimited social and intellectual progress.[41] Since the possibility
of progress "presupposes that there is the simply good life,"[42] the
ancients are well aware of man's ability to advance his condition. Yet, as
Strauss explains, the modern idea of progress differs from the ancient
understanding in both aspirations and scope.[43] Differentiating between
technical, intellectual, and social progress, the ancients look askance at
the notion of inherent connections between such advancements on the
grounds that unceasing alterations are incompatible with the stability
required for political life. Furthermore, as Strauss interprets Aristotle, the
intellectual and technical progress that human beings could make is
inherently limited by both the intellectual inequality of man and the
natural propensity for eventual periods of epistemological decay.[44]

In contrast to the ancient understanding of progress, the modern
idea of progress is built on belief in "a guaranteed parallelism between
intellectual and social progress."[45] Born out of modern science's effort to

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[36] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 48.

[37] Ibid., 47.

[38] Ibid., 96.

[39] Ibid., 47.

[40] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 175-177.

[41] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 96.

[42] Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,"
Modern Judaism 1, no. 1 (May 1981): 24.

[43] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 96.

[44] Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 25.

[45] Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 25.

make uninterrupted headway in "relieving man's estate,"[46] the idea of progress is "bound up with the notion of the conquest of nature"[47] such that it rejects the Aristotelian inevitability of "telluric or cosmic catastrophes."[48] Viewing their own achievements as "unqualified progress beyond all earlier thought" in light of the "necessary parallelism between intellectual and social progress,"[49] early modern thinkers understand themselves as establishing a social and intellectual "floor" below which their successors cannot descend. By the twentieth century, this understanding of progress would contribute heavily to what Strauss identifies as "the crisis of our time."[50]

Given the undeniable connection between the idea of progress and the development of modern natural science, one might be tempted to lodge the origin of such developments in the great scientific minds of the seventeenth century. Strauss, however, traces this genealogy back to Machiavelli's exception-driven rejection of the ancients' teleological understanding of mankind. Deriding as "unrealistic" the notion that man is "by nature ordered to virtue or perfection,"[51] Machiavelli ultimately casts aside the notion of natural ends altogether[52] and contributes to mankind's emancipation from a restricting sense of inborn purpose.[53] Accordingly, while the ancients saw science as "the preserve of a small minority," the moderns would thereafter strive for a "leveling of the natural differences of the mind"[54] in order to facilitate the popularization and unbridled advancement of technical knowledge. In sum, while Strauss gives much credit to thinkers such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon, he nonetheless declares that "the enlightenment…begins with Machiavelli."[55]

Building on Machiavelli's connection to enlightenment thought, Strauss traces the totalitarian and imperial nature of modern tyranny to

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46 Ibid., 27.

47 Ibid., 27.

48 Ibid., 25.

49 Ibid., 27.

50 Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 96.

51 Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 42.

52 Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* 178-179.

53 Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 42.

54 Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 25.

55 Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 46.

the emancipation of human passions. In discussing the all-encompassing nature of contemporary tyranny, Strauss argues that Machiavelli contributed in part to this liberation of often-vicious desires by providing vainglorious men with a moral sanction to subjugate the bulk of humanity and "achieve universal recognition" to a degree never encouraged by classical morality.[56] Accordingly, tyranny in the modern world differs from the despotism of the ancients both in the greatness of its scope and the diabolical nature of its designs. Thus, recognizing that tyranny had mixed itself with enlightenment to create a uniquely modern monster, Strauss traces the roots of this ruinous development back to Machiavelli's thought.

III.   MACHIAVELLI AND MODERNITY'S INEFFECTUAL RESPONSE TO TYRANNY

Having examined the substance of Strauss' assertion that "contemporary tyranny has its roots in Machiavellian thought,"[57] we may now turn to Strauss' interpretation of Machiavelli's influence on modernity's ineffectual response to tyranny. While acknowledging that modern tyranny differs from that of the ancients in several respects, Strauss presents man as burdened with a universal impulse toward tyranny such that classical understandings of tyranny remain relevant to understanding modern tyranny. [58] In his discussion of Aristotle's political science, Strauss puts great emphasis on what he terms "the supremacy of the regime."[59] In addition to their theoretical considerations of the "best regime," the ancients assigned moral value to the regimes that they actually encountered. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle treats the desirability of various forms of regimes, extolling benevolent kingship while declaring tyranny to be a base, self-serving, and highly undesirable outcome of monarchical decay.[60] By combining analytical observation with normative evaluation, the ancients confidently identified tyranny as "the most inferior regime."[61]

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[56] Ibid., 111.

[57] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli,* 13-14.

[58] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?,* 95.

[59] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 47.

[60] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 8.11, 1160a32-1160b35.

[61] Ibid., 8.11, 1160b8.

But while the ancients link moral virtue with political prudence such that tyranny is considered both vicious and inexpedient, Strauss interprets Machiavelli as defending a conception of tyranny devoid of such value-laden condemnations.[62] In *The Prince*, Strauss observes, Machiavelli uses the term "prince" to refer to both kings and tyrants alike, arguing that rulers might be best served by impartially alternating between benevolent rule and tyrannical cruelty in pursuit of personal and national glory.[63] Accordingly, while Aristotle directed his political teachings toward "more or less perfect gentlemen,"[64] Machiavelli goes so far as to instruct potential tyrants in how to bring about what the ancients considered to be the most defective form of regime.[65] Conceding that Machiavelli "preferred republics to monarchies,"[66] tyrannical or not, Strauss nonetheless argues that Machiavelli's "reinterpretation of virtue" is closely tied to his treatment of tyranny.[67]

To provide further detail on the Straussian distinction between Machiavelli's and Aristotle's presentations of tyranny, one may look to their differing treatments of the legitimacy of absolute rule. Although the ancients are aware of scenarios which, as a result of a severely-decayed political order, may require the absolute rule of a Caesar-type figure, Strauss notes that they purposefully avoid elaborating on the "dangerous doctrine" implied in the legitimacy of such unusual arrangements.[68] Although they value contemplation in political life, the ancients are equally conscious of the dangers posed by the popularization of political philosophy. Reflecting their notion of a hierarchy of regimes, Strauss argues, the ancients choose to limit their written discussions of "post-constitutional rule" based on their prudential preference that the bulk of humanity, unable to adequately grasp such nuances, look to "the potential Caesar" with the same apprehension as they would feel toward "a potential tyrant."[69]

However, while the classics prudently avoid the pitfalls of

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[62] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli,* 10.

[63] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 289.

[64] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 28.

[65] Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 226.

[66] Ibid., 226.

[67] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 289.

[68] Ibid., 98.

[69] Ibid., 98.

discussing such extreme situations, Machiavelli revels in the consideration of remote possibilities.[70] Returning again and again to the founding of new political orders, Machiavelli has a penchant for the "extreme situation" leads him to forgo the classical reluctance toward such considerations and, as has been discussed, to undermine the Aristotelian distinction between monarchy and tyranny altogether.[71] Ultimately, Strauss interprets Machiavelli as lowering the situational threshold for the justification of absolute rule by considering expediency alone.[72] Accordingly, Machiavelli's sanction of calculating, situational utilization of both virtue *and* vice contributes to the contemporary failure to wholeheartedly condemn policies which, although effective, are nonetheless tyrannical.

Strauss' argument that Machiavelli plays a preliminary role in the development and popularization of modern scientific thought also uncovers his understanding of modernity's philosophical impediments to understanding tyranny. Referencing Aristotle, Strauss notes that classical political philosophy identifies the consideration of preexisting "opinions" as the proper means by which to arrive at knowledge of "the human things."[73] As modern science rejects the viability of opinion as a starting point for knowledge and substitutes observation in its place, it necessarily dismisses the notion of classical political philosophy.[74] Consequently, Strauss connects Machiavelli's degradation of value distinctions to the modern doctrines of "positivism" and "radical historicism" which together assert that man is unable to definitively "distinguish…between good and evil."[75]

In his criticism of positivism, Strauss focuses on the "fact/value distinction" — a separation of factual knowledge of what "is" from value judgements regarding what "ought to be." As scientific knowledge extends only to factual observations, positivists assert that any distinction between what "ought to be" from what "is" is entirely

[70] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 162.

[71] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli,* 272.

[72] Ibid., 271.

[73] Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* 78.

[74] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy,* 9-27.

[75] Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 27.

unknowable.[76] Arguing that the logic of the fact/value distinction is inherently self-contradictory, Strauss nonetheless recognizes the threat which such thinking poses to political philosophy as "the attempt to truly know…the right, or good, political order."[77] Thus, in light of Machiavelli's rejection of transcendent standards, Strauss connects Machiavelli's neutrality in conflicts between republics and tyrants with the origins and practical implications of the fact/value distinction.[78]

But while positivism threatens the possibility of philosophy by rejecting opinion as a viable starting point for knowledge, modernity's self-alienation from consideration of "the primary issues" would culminate in what Strauss referred to as "radical historicism."[79] Characterizing radical historicism as an inevitable outgrowth of positivism, Strauss heavily criticizes the historicist contention that philosophy, as the quest for truth, is impossible due to "the essentially historical character of society and of human thought."[80] Thereby coming to the conclusion that transcendent knowledge of fundamental questions is simply unavailable to man, radical historicism rejects the fact/value distinction and joins positivism in arguing that there can be no knowledge of a truly good society.[81] Warning of the destructive consequences of such thinking, Strauss excoriates positivism[82] and radical historicism[83] as key contributors to the intellectual and political aspects of "the crisis of our time."

Having discussed the intellectual consequences of the Machiavellian pivot, we may now consider the humanitarian implications of modernity's hesitancy to identify tyranny as such. As a German Jew born at the turn of the twentieth century, Strauss witnessed the rise of political ideologies, such as fascism and communism, which both grew out of and further contributed to "the crisis of our time." In his discussion of the West's response to the rise of such regimes, Strauss

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[76] Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael P. Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 25-26.

[77] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 12.

[78] Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 283.

[79] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 55.

[80] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 26.

[81] Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 22.

[82] Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 35-80.

[83] Ibid., 28.

asserts that contemporary social scientists' undermine "ultimate principles," leading to the Machiavellian belief that "everything a man is willing to dare will be permissible."[84] This contemporary notion, which Strauss declares to be "identical with nihilism,"[85] contributes to both the rise of tyrannical states and the failure of modern social science to properly diagnose them.[86] While Strauss argues in particular that the rise of National Socialism grew out of a nihilistic desire to destroy modern civilization,[87] he also asserts that social science's crippling aversion to value judgements led to the Nazi regime being described as "totalitarian" rather than properly denounced as "tyrannical."[88] Strauss understands such relativistic thinking as provoking a political crisis culminating in the notion that "our ultimate principles have no other support than our arbitrary and hence blind preferences."[89] In this way, as Strauss so elegantly writes, social scientists have backed themselves into a position analogous to that of a physician who, in encountering an aggressive form of cancer, finds himself intellectually incapable of making a proper diagnosis.[90]

Criticizing the pervasive relativism which gave rise to the intellectual and political "crisis of our time," throughout his writings Leo Strauss urges a return to classical political philosophy as a cognitive buttress against contemporary tyranny. Although modern tyranny differs from that analyzed by the ancients, the character of modern tyranny is nonetheless unintelligible in the absence of value judgements employed by classical political science.[91] Providing a critical presentation of the history of Western thought, Strauss observes that the possibility of such value-oriented contemplation has been continually undermined in the wake of Machiavelli's fixation on the "extreme situation." By presenting virtue and vice as equally praiseworthy depending upon the exigencies of a given situation, Machiavelli decouples morality and politics in a manner which rejects the Aristotelian hierarchy of regimes.

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84 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 4-5.

85 Ibid., 5.

86 Leo Strauss, "On Tyranny," 23.

87 Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," *Interpretation* 26 no. 3 (Spring 1999): 357.

88 Strauss, "On Tyranny," 23.

89 Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 4.

90 Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?,* 95.

91 Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 23.

This Machiavellian degradation of value distinctions contributes to the modern doctrines of positivism and radical historicism, which together underlie the unwillingness of modern social scientists to identify and condemn tyranny as such. Furthermore, Machiavelli's "hidden kinship" with modern natural science and the idea of unlimited progress strengthens his connection with modern tyranny. Accordingly, Strauss frames his comparison of the Machiavellian and Aristotelian attitudes toward morality and the palatability of tyranny within his all-encompassing objective of restoring "the difference between good and bad" to its rightful place as "the most fundamental of all practical or political distinctions."[92]

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[92] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 97.

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