

IS MACHIAVELLI'S DISCUSSION OF THE ETERNITY OF THE WORLD AVERROISTIC?

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In this paper I want to explore the relationship between Machiavelli and Latin Averroism. The claim that Machiavelli is an Averroist of some sort is made most notably in Strauss' influential if controversial *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. It is seconded in the only English language commentary on the *Discourse on Livy* (Mansfield's *New Modes and Orders*) and more recently in Paul Rahe's *Against Throne and Altar*.¹ Strauss makes this suggestion in the context of his account of Machiavelli's discussion of the eternity of the world in book II of the *Discourses on Livy*. Strauss notes that educated men of Machiavelli's day were widely familiar with the doctrines of Averroës, and that "we must turn to the books of the 'Averroists' in order to complete Machiavelli's intimations"²—in other words, Latin Averroism will provide the interpretive key for ferreting out Machiavelli's unstated meanings; for Strauss this means, among other things, the attempt to displace the Christian revelation with a new secular understanding of life and philosophy. However Strauss does not follow through with a discussion of the doctrine of the eternity of the world, turning instead to Machiavelli's account of the origin of religion.³ In what follows, I will focus on Machiavelli's discussion of the eternity of the world as a way of examining the relationship, if any, between Latin Averroism and Machiavelli. In doing this, I want to emphasize that I am interested in comparing their arguments, not in analyzing the history of Machiavelli's sources.⁴ I shall argue that while Machiavelli and the Latin Averroists agree regarding the eternity of the world, Machiavelli's argument is in no way similar to that of the Latin Averroists.

For the uninitiated, Latin Averroism is the term used to refer to a philosophical movement in the Latin-speaking world that sprang up with the translation and reception of Aristotle's *corpus* and the Arabic, in particular, Averroës', commentaries. Latin Averroism is largely associated with the arts masters who taught logic in the medieval universities, rather than the theology departments, where the more famous Medieval Latin thinkers, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, worked. The Latin Averroists argued, among other theses, that the world was demonstrably eternal, contrary to the Christian belief that it was created.⁵ They carefully added that Christian belief trumped philosophical demonstration, but it is an open question as to the sincerity of this addition.⁶ In any case, the thesis affirming the eternity of the world was condemned a number of times, most famously in the condemnation of 1277. The condemnation of 1277 lumped in the thesis that the world is eternal with a seemingly grab-bag list of condemned theses having to do with religious belief and practices, ethics and epistemology and even astrology and magic. However, it has been argued that this is not the grab-bag it seems, but rather takes aim at a set of theories and practices that presented a philosophical life as an alternative to that of the Christian theologian.⁷ Indeed, the first two propositions condemned in 1277 read as follows:

1. That there is no more excellent state than to study philosophy.
2. That the only wise men in the world are the philosophers.⁸

The eternity of the world is mentioned only much later in the document. Whence, although the scholastic debate regarding the eternity of the world was in the first place a

metaphysical one, it was connected in its larger context to the development and articulation of a distinctively philosophical way of life that stands as an alternative to the theology of the day.⁹ This defense of the philosophical life culminates with the claim that the philosopher could be happy in this life rather than in the next life and that the philosophical life is superior to its other alternatives, including (implicitly) the life of faith.¹⁰ As a part of this, the philosopher offered not merely a theoretical alternative to a theology, but a counter-asceticism and morality that was oriented towards enjoying this life rather than the next one.¹¹ In particular, it was argued that the contemplation of the highest and best things is the goal of the philosopher's life—however, this contemplation is not done with the eyes of faith but with knowledge derived from the philosophic study of nature.¹²

This philosophical alternative is based on a vision of the philosophical life developed in the Arabic commentaries on book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and subsequent Latin work on the basis of those commentaries. Here the Aristotelian vision of the contemplative *telos* of philosophy is linked to the account of demonstration found in the logical and metaphysical texts, in particular the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. In brief, the philosopher's contemplation is limited to those things which can be known demonstratively. A demonstrative argument is found in its paradigmatic form in the *Barbara* syllogism, where two universal affirmative propositions are used to derive a third universal affirmative proposition. The content of these propositions should be based on first principles, true, and necessary (which in turn implies eternal and universal), thereby ensuring that the conclusion will be as well. If we keep in mind the Aristotelian restriction of *episteme* (in Latin *scientia*) to necessary, eternal, and universal truths¹³, the importance of an eternal world for the philosophical life becomes apparent: the world is capable of being understood philosophically only insofar as it is necessary; the doctrine of creation, which implies the contingency of the world, means that the philosopher's contemplative activity cannot include the contemplation of nature or the universe.

There are a number of similarities between Machiavelli and Latin Averroism. First, both Machiavelli and the Averroists attribute power over human life to the stars and other astral bodies.¹⁴ Second, both Latin Averroists and Machiavelli associate themselves with a cyclical view of history.¹⁵ Third, Machiavelli's habit of making pious sounding affirmations, only to take them back later in the course of his argument, suggests a rhetorical strategy similar to that of the Latin Averroists, who affirmed that the truths of faith trumped Aristotle, even as they argued for the correctness of Aristotle's view (Boethius of Dacia claims to believe in an afterlife *per fidem* but says it is rational for the philosopher to desire a long life on this earth).¹⁶ We can see a similar strategy in Machiavelli's discussion of Agathocles in *The Prince*. Beginning by describing his cruel and murderous rise to power, Machiavelli admits that one cannot call this virtuous behavior.¹⁷ However, by the end of that same chapter, he has argued that cruelty, executed quickly and decisively, is well used and in fact a virtue deserving of praise by God and man.¹⁸

Third, one can see the attraction of the Averroistic reading of Machiavelli insofar Latin Averroists and Machiavelli both agree that happiness is to be looked for primarily in this life. As we saw, the Latin Averroists argued that happiness is to be found in this world through the adoption of the philosophical life¹⁹ and Machiavelli faults Christianity for

suggesting that the *next world* might be more important than this one; more precisely, he claims that the view that places the highest good in the afterlife is responsible for the weakness of the present age vis-à-vis the Romans.²⁰ This is also why he believes that the doctrine of the eternity of the world is politically salutary; if the world is eternal, then the highest good can only be found here.²¹ So both Machiavelli and Latin Averroism agree in promoting the primacy of this world over and against the theological concern with the afterlife, and in both cases, this primacy is connected with an affirmation of the world's eternity. However, one should note that the Latin Averroists' defense of an autonomous philosophical life is nevertheless associated with a contemplative context not found in Machiavelli. While Machiavelli says that he loves his city more than his soul,²² it is the life of the philosopher, not the politician, that the Averroist asserts is the best life.

This, to my mind, is the crucial difference, and a comparison of their respective stances on the eternity of the world will help us further clarify this difference. Machiavelli's argument for an eternal world has little in common with those of the Latin Averroists if we take the tracts of Boethius of Dacia or Siger of Brabant as paradigmatic. Siger's argument for the eternity of the world is derived from Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics* and the commentaries of Averroës. To briefly summarize: if there is a prime mover that is pure actuality, it must be always acting whence the eternity of the prime mover implies the eternity of movement. Keep in mind here that this eternal movement is assumed to be eternally the same: the purity of action found in the prime mover does not allow for change since that would presuppose potency rather than act; instead, Aristotle describes this movement as "an eternal self-repeating sameness."²³ So if the eternal movement of the prime mover is an eternal self-repeating sameness, this means that there could not be a moment of creation where non-existent species were called into existence by the prime mover's action. Siger goes so far as to say that the creation of a species is impossible.²⁴ Instead, whatever species exist must have always existed; this leads Siger to conclude that species, not individuals they are instantiated in, are eternal. The eternity of a species, which as an Aristotelian he believes are never free floating forms, in turn implies that there have always been particular member of that species.²⁵

Machiavelli's argument, on the other hand, makes no reference to either Aristotle's *Physics* or *Metaphysics* or to Averroës commentaries there upon. Instead, he simply begins by stating that some philosophers argue that the world is eternal and then raises an objection to this view, an objection that repeats—and is probably borrowed from—Augustine of Hippo's debate with the Neo-Platonist Apuleius on the same issue in book twelve of *The City of God*.²⁶ Briefly, Augustine argued that the world is not eternal because if it were we would expect historical records stretching back further than they in fact do. Since our histories only go back so far, Augustine concludes that the world is not eternal. Moreover, he argues that the common response to this argument—to claim that history is cyclical insofar as civilizations rise and fall, destroying all records of distant antiquity—also fails insofar as he finds nothing in the historical record to indicate such a rupture.²⁷ Machiavelli's opening remarks in chapter five of book II simply abbreviate Augustine's argument, but immediately raises an objection to said argument:

To those philosophers who would have it that the world is eternal, I believe that one could reply that if so much antiquity were true it would be reasonable that there be memory of more than five thousand years—if it were not seen how the

memories of time are eliminated by diverse causes, of which part come from men, part from heaven.²⁸

In short, while Augustine argues that the world cannot be eternal because reliable histories do not suggest any great disasters or lost civilizations but instead show a continuity of civilizations, Machiavelli will argue that (a) there are such disasters and that (b) the founders of new civilizations conspire to destroy records of the previous ones. He will spend the remainder of this chapter developing this objection at length. In book one of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli discusses the ancient idea of a cycle of regimes. There he criticizes the theory for assuming that any given regime will last long enough to complete the cycle: according to Machiavelli, when in the corrupt and weaker moments of the cycle, another stronger regime will simply “gobble up” the weak one. In this part of book two, he adds to this, pointing out that the victors will often do their best to obfuscate the admirable qualities of the defeated regime. This, in a nutshell, is his explanation of why history does not seem cyclical to Augustine: the victors conspire to destroy the records of previous situations.

This casts doubt on Augustine’s claim that history is non-cyclical, but it does not suggest more than that. Even if were to be very generous and allow Machiavelli to go beyond casting doubt on non-cyclicity and to claim that history is cyclical, he nevertheless has bit more work to do if he wants to prove that the world is indeed eternal: the affirmation of a cyclical view of history does not imply eternity of the world. To prove that the world is eternal, Machiavelli needs to argue that the cyclical view of history always implies an eternal world: in other words, the claim “if the world is eternal then it is cyclical” needs to be supplemented by the stronger claim that “the world is eternal if and only if it is cyclical.” We can find this stronger claim in Siger of Brabant, who maintains that there is a necessary connection between eternity and cyclical history,²⁹ but can we find in Machiavelli’s texts an argument for this stronger claim?

I do not think that we can. Machiavelli’s singular disinterest in metaphysics, signaled by his famous denunciation of “imagined Republics” in *The Prince* prevents him from tackling these questions with the metaphysical subtlety they require.³⁰

The scholastic Latin Averroists understood a demonstration to be an argument that proceeds at the level of universals on the basis of first principles, the classic form being the *Barbara* syllogism, a syllogism comprised of two true universal affirmative propositions (i.e., A-propositions) leading to a third true universal affirmative in the conclusion. This suggests that despite the aforementioned similarities, Machiavelli’s discussion of the eternity of the world cannot be read in terms of Latin Averroism since it does not proceed at the level of universals, but instead argues on the basis of history, i.e., particular contingent events. According to the strictures of Aristotelian logic, historical facts, cannot serve as premises in a demonstrable argument because they always pertain to particulars rather than universals.³¹ Moreover, Machiavelli’s argument does not proceed from first principles, but from a rather dubitable premise: that there are numerous successful conspiracies to utterly erase the memories of ancient civilizations. The *sine qua non* of Latin Averroism is the claim that the world is demonstrably eternal; this is to be demonstrated through arguments based on Aristotelian metaphysics. Machiavelli, on the other hand, avoids metaphysical arguments to offers instead historical and dialectical ones. So, while in agreement with the Latin Averroist that the world is eternal, his

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argument is not Averroistic. Of course, Machiavelli should not be faulted for failing to satisfy the demands of the *Organon* insofar as he is not passing himself off as an Aristotelian. But readers of Machiavelli who present him as something of an Averroist can and should be faulted.

In conclusion, I want to return to the opening paragraph of this paper where I described, and complained about Strauss's influential claim that Machiavelli is in some sense an Averroist. As we can see now, while in agreement with the Averroists regarding the eternity of the world, it seems hard to maintain that this agreement is anything more than coincidental since Machiavelli and the Latin Averroists offer completely different arguments. This means that Strauss was wrong to claim that the books of the Averroists help us to understand Machiavelli's intentions. Instead, reading Machiavelli as an Averroist only obfuscates his true intentions; on the other hand, closer attention to his debate with Augustine might reveal those intentions. In *The City of God* Augustine was interested in, among other things, arguing that the Romans were wrong to believe that happiness can be found in this life; as part of this, Augustine was at pains to show the transitory nature of earthly happiness, and indeed, the earth. Machiavelli's argument that the world is eternal may be better understood as a rehabilitation of the Roman ideal in contrast to *The City of God* than Latin Averroism.³²

NOTES

1. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958) 202-203; Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979) 202-203. Paul Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar: Machiavelli and Political Theory under the English Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) has taken up the Straussian thesis at length, and offers a handy summary of high points in the history of Arabic philosophy, but does not pay as much attention to the Latin reception of Averroës.

2. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* 203.

3. Strauss 203-205.

4. The question of Machiavelli's sources for his discussion of the eternity of the world is addressed at length in Gennaro Sasso, "De Aeternitate Mundi (*Discorsi* II.5)," *Machiavelli e gli Antichi e altri Saggi* (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi Editori, 1986) 167-398.

5. For a brief list and discussion of the theses characteristic of Latin Averroism, see John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 253-254.

6. Boethius of Dacia puts it this way: "The Christian says something true, if he says the world and the first motion are new, and that there was a first man, and that the numerically same man will be resurrected, and that a generable thing can be made without generation, because he concedes these things are possible according to a more powerful cause than natural causes; but it is also true that these are not possible from the causes and principles of nature. Accordingly a naturalist concedes or denies nothing except based on natural principles and causes, just as the grammarian denies or concedes nothing except according to the principles and causes of grammar. And when the naturalist only considers the power of natural causes, he says the world and the first motion are not new; but when from Christian faith, he considers causes superior to nature, he says the world could be new on that basis. The one does not contradict the other. Therefore they are two different things: the first, which is according to nature, does not contradict the Christian belief regarding the eternity of the world, and the other is not able to show, through natural reasons, that the world and first motion are new." (*Boetii de Dacia tractatus De aeternitate mundi*, ed. Sajo, G., Berlin, De. Gruyter, Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der

Philosophie; Bd. 4, 1964 46-48, my translation). However, we have to keep in mind that Boethius' view, expressed elsewhere, that the philosopher follows only natural causes, and that those who do not follow him in this practice, sin against the natural order—see G. Klima (ed). "On the Supreme Good," *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 355. This is why Alain de Libera writes that Latin Averroism does not offer a doctrine of a "double truth" (as is sometimes said) but an *autre vérité*, a way of relating to the truth that is at odds with that of Christian theology. See Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Âge* (Chemins de Pensée, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991) 137.

7. For a general discussion of this debate, see John Marenbon *Medieval Philosophy* 267-268. For an in depth presentation and defense of the maximalist interpretation (which I incline towards) of the condemnation, see Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Âge* and *Raison et foi : archéologie d'une crise d'Albert le Grand à Jean-Paul II* Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003). For a study of the *Condemnation*, the papers edited in Aertsen, Jan A., Kent Emery, Jr. and Andreas Speer (eds.), *Nach der Verurteilung von 1277. Philosophie und Theologie an der Universität von Paris im letzten Viertel des 13. Jahrhunderts. Studien und Texte*, Berlin, New York, 2001) are invaluable.

8. G. Klima, trans. and ed. *Medieval Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 181.

9. Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Âge*, 156-168; see Giles of Rome, *Errors of the Philosophers*, IV.1 where he associates Averroës' endorsement of the eternity of the world with the mocking of both Christianity and Islam insofar as he suggests the creationist beliefs of both religions are arbitrary and lacking in reason; this text is available in Klima (2007).

10. Boethius of Dacia, *On the Supreme Good*. 357; see propositions 172 and 174 of the *Condemnation*.

11. Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Âge*, 195-220.

12. Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Âge* 179: he describes Latin Averroism as « an alternate [autre] theology, an alternate system of the connection between the soul, the world and God, contending with Christian theology for the ground: after centuries of absence, the idea of philosophical salvation [salut philosophique] appeared again in the arena" (my translation).

13. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*. J. Barnes, trans. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 2002) 71b 10-20.

14. Virilio, *Machiavelli*, 17-21; *Condemnation* # 154 and 156. See too Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Âge* 253-272.

15. Compare Siger of Brabant, *The Eternity of the World* Peter King, trans. ¶82. (Available at http://individual.utoronto.ca/pking/translations/SIGER.Eternity_of_World.pdf) with Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.2 and II.5.

16. Hasse, "Arabic Philosophy", 128: "The insertion of a Christian caveat in a philosophical context is typical of Renaissance Aristotelianism." But, as Hasse also points out, we cannot take these caveats at face value—they are often made in response ecclesial pressure rather than offered voluntarily. However, these caveats should not necessarily be taken simply as sops thrown to angry ecclesiastics. In fact, the precise nature of the relationship between philosophy and theology in Latin Averroism remains a matter of debate: is the orthodox caveat simply insincere, or does it amount to a fideistic abandonment of a philosophical conclusion in the name of a higher science. I tend towards the first reading, but for a discussion of the second reading, see G. Klima, "*Ancilla Theologiae vs. Domina Philosophorum*: Thomas Aquinas, Latin Averroism, and the Autonomy of Philosophy" J. Aertsen, & A. Speer, eds. *What is Philosophy in the Middle Ages? Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy (SIEPM)*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 393-402).

17. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VIII (28-29). The Roman numerals refer to chapter numbers, the Arabic numbers in parenthesis refer to the pagination in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*. M. Bonfantini, ed. La Letteratura Italiana: Storia e Testi 29. Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1954. For English citations, I use Machiavelli, *The Prince*. L. P. de Alvarez, trans. (Chicago: Waveland P, 1989).

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18. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VIII, (31).
19. Boethius of Dacia, *On the Highest Good*, 355.
20. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, H. Mansfield & N. Tarcro, trans. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996) II.2 (227).
21. Machiavelli, *Discourse* II.2 227.
22. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, III.7 690 and Machiavelli, *The Letters of Machiavelli*. A. Gilbert, trans. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) #225 (1136).
23. See Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, R. Hope, trans. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003) 1072a10 and following.
24. Siger of Brabant, *The Eternity of the World* 79.
25. Siger of Brabant, *The Eternity of the World* ¶82.
26. See the discussion in Sasso, "de Aeternitate Mundi" 256-260: for Sasso we cannot be certain that Machiavelli read Augustine, but neither can we exclude that possibility. At the same time he agrees that the passages in the *Discourses* and *City of God* are in "significant opposition" (*significato opposto*). Sasso continues to point out other passages in *The Discourses* where Augustine is present in some uncertain way. For an argument that claims he did have an intimate knowledge of Augustine, see Paul Wright, "Machiavelli's *City of God*: Civic Humanism and Augustinian Terror." *Augustine and Politics*. J. Doody, K.L. Hughes, and K. Paffenroth, trans. (New York: Lexington Books, 2005) 297-336).
27. This is an abbreviation of Augustine, *City of God*, XII.
28. Machiavelli *Discourses on Livy*, II.5 235.
29. Siger of Brabant, *On the Eternity of the World* ¶81.
30. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XV (50).
31. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 72a1-5; see too 87b30-88a15 on the imperceptibility of universals.
32. Thanks to Michael R. Kelly for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.