Machiavelli’s Lessons for Public Administration

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On issues concerning the basis and function of political science and public administration as a discipline, Max Weber provides answers that are puzzling when more closely examined. In this article, it is demonstrated that coherent answers to these issues can be found in the work of Niccolò Machiavelli. Moreover, Machiavelli’s perspective can solve the puzzle that Weber creates. This perspective explains, more explicitly and elaborately than Weber, how the practice and the study of public administration are to be distinguished, but, at the same time, are connected and similar. We conclude by showing the implications of Machiavelli’s approach for public administration education, research, and advice.

In his Republic, Plato (2007) presented answers to questions that are basic to public administration and political science: (a) Is reliable knowledge for governance possible? (b) If so, what type of knowledge can experts in administration and government offer? (c) What should be the role of experts to powerholders? According to Plato, some people, after lengthy study and contemplation, can develop a rational grip on universal and unchanging ideas. These ideas encompass knowledge of the true, the beautiful, and the good and just. People who have arrived at this level of understanding should be philosopher-kings (Plato, 2007). Nowadays, few will find these three interconnected answers convincing, because of epistemological reasons (the problems in Plato’s rationalism were already pointed out by Aristotle, 1933/1989a, 1926/1989b, or because of their antidemocratic character (e.g., Mill, 1861/1991, Chap. 3). For many current scholars in public administration, the evident answers to these basic issues will likely be the answers that Max Weber provided. These answers are, in every way, are opposite to those of Plato: (a) Reliable knowledge should be built on empirical methods. We cannot have knowledge of universal, eternal truths; we can only hope for empirical theories that last a few decades.

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(b) True or scientific knowledge is limited in scope and concerns causal relations, not aesthetics or ethics. (c) The scientific advisor should, with a detached attitude, provide inconvenient facts to people in power. Having knowledge does not provide the legitimacy to rule (Weber, 1961b, pp. 145–151).

Attractive or evident as Weber’s answers may seem to many of us, his position is puzzling for several reasons. Notwithstanding his own advice in the essay “Science as a Vocation,” Weber in his political writings goes beyond merely indicating inconvenient facts. The comments and advice that he provides in his political writings clearly express certain ideals concerning the state and politics—for example, on the value of individual liberty and representative politics (Beetham, 1985; Lassman, 2000). The claim that expert advisors should limit themselves to expressing facts is also puzzling in the context of “Science as a Vocation.” In this text, Weber claims that every scientific discipline encompasses certain values. Medical science, for example, contains the presupposition that its responsibility is to maintain life and diminish suffering (Weber, 1961b, p. 144). However, does that not mean that every scientific advisor will (and must) also always be led by his disciplinary valuations and concerns? Have those values not inspired scientific advisors to particular lines of research that will bring them to particular (inconvenient) facts and not others? Finally, if scientific experts are completely detached and value-free, why should they bother to provide advice at all? Although Plato brought scientific expertise and governing too close together, Weber seems to do the opposite. Weber’s strict distinction appears to be untenable, even in his own work and actions.

In this article, the focus is on another classic author who provided answers to the three basic questions: Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli is often presented as the first (modern) scientist in the field of politics and administration (Cassirer, 1950; Olschki, 1945; Parel, 1972; Walker, 1950; Wolin, 1960). However, in public administration, his work is rarely investigated. Machiavelli, to be sure, also stood close to the classical era. He explicitly refers to ancient Greece and Rome as inspiring examples in the preface to his Discourses (Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 191). Machiavelli can be seen as located between (or in both) modernity and premodernity (e.g., Brenner, 2009; Hariman, 1989; McIntosh, 1984; Parel, 1991; Yoran, 2010.) I will not investigate whether and in what sense Machiavelli’s ideas are to be judged as modern or premodern. His historical position between the extreme positions of the modern Weber and the premodern Plato, however, suggests that we may find a moderate middle position in Machiavelli. Occasionally, Weber explicitly refers to the Florentine master. In “Politics as a Vocation,” for example, he refers to Machiavelli’s The Prince and History of Florence (Weber, 1961a, p. 124, p. 126). There are some clear similarities in Weber’s and Machiavelli’s outlooks that appear when we compare these books. They both understand politics as essentially a matter of conflict and strife over the power of a state. Weber and Machiavelli both have a particular interest in the strong political leader. As one more example, they also both address what nowadays is called the issue of “dirty hands” in a fairly similar way. On the issue of dirty hands, some scholars maintain that Weber’s understanding exceeds Machiavelli’s (Parel, 1972, p. 14; Walzer, 1973). However, does Weber’s understanding exceed Machiavelli’s on other issues?

The central question of this article is: What are Machiavelli’s answers to the basic questions of public administration as a discipline, and does his position help us overcome the puzzlement that Weber creates?

Each of the following three sections concentrates on Machiavelli’s answer to one of the basic questions. After this elaboration, the concluding section considers whether Machiavelli can help
us overcome the confusion. The article then addresses what Machiavelli’s outlook implies for public administration education, research, and advice.  

MACHIAVELLI’S METHOD

Driven by the natural eagerness I have always felt for doing without any hesitation the things that I believe will bring benefit common to everybody, I have determined to enter upon a path not yet trodden by anyone. (Preface to Discourses, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 190)

In discussing this material I depart very far from the methods of others. But since my purpose is to write something useful to him who comprehends it, I have decided that I must concern myself with the truth of the matter as facts show it rather than with any fanciful notion. (The Prince, Chapter XV, Gilbert, 1965/1999, p. 57)

Machiavelli is often presented as the founding father of the political and administrative sciences. As evidence for this claim, passages from his works, such as those above, are often cited. Machiavelli himself claims to walk a new path, which involves considering facts, not fancy. Cassirer cites with appreciation Bacon, who regarded Machiavelli as a kindred spirit “who had broken away from all scholastic methods and tried to study politics according to empirical methods” (Cassirer, 1950, p. 130). Cassirer also presents Machiavelli as the Galileo of political science (Cassirer, 1950, pp. 119, 130; see also Olschki, 1945; Parel, 1972; Walker, 1950; Wolin, 1960).

Machiavelli begins the Discourses in what appears to be a general Renaissance approach by emphasizing the importance of considering ancient times and trying to learn from one’s predecessors; one should follow the example of the physicians and lawyers of his time. However, Machiavelli observes, “in setting up states, in maintaining governments, in ruling kingdoms, in organizing armies and managing war, in executing laws among subjects, in expanding an empire, not a single prince or republic now resorts to the examples of the ancients” (Preface to Discourses, Gilbert, 1965/1999, p. 191). States are mistaken not to employ these lessons, Machiavelli maintains. He differs from many Renaissance writers, however, in the way we should learn from earlier times. Unlike his contemporaries, such as Erasmus in his mirror Education of a Christian Prince (1516), Machiavelli hardly ever cites authoritative statements of ancient writers (cf. Barlow, 1999; Hariman, 1989; Violi, 1998, pp. 3–4; Wood, 1965, p. xxii). His objects, furthermore, are not ancient theories and philosophical arguments, but the deeds of great statesmen as recorded by historians (Fleischer, 1995, p. 331, p. 133). Neither does Machiavelli derive his recommendations from any comprehensive metaphysical understanding, whether cosmological, religious, or historicist. He does occasionally refer to the influence of celestial bodies, the importance of religious beliefs, and the periodic rise and decline of nations (Parel, 1991). Yet these examples are far too few and too unsystematic to conclude a metaphysical basis underlying Machiavelli’s claims. It is not unreasonable to suppose that these references are often used by Machiavelli for rhetorical reasons. Moreover, Machiavelli is very clear on the point that human beings can (and, in fact, should) determine their own destiny instead of having to follow a predetermined scheme (Berlin, 1955/2013; Cassirer, 1950, p. 157; Flanagan, 1972; Parel, 1991; Wolin, 1960, p. 224; Wood, 1972, p. 56).

In the fashion of modern science, Machiavelli offers cause-and-effect-claims. In Chapter XVI of The Prince, he notes, for example, that seeking the reputation of liberality will
eventually undermine one’s position as a prince (Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, pp. 59–61). In Book I of The Art of War, he claims that by employing mercenaries, one brings thieves and villains into one’s country (Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 2, pp. 574–575). As a last example, in the Discourses (Bk. 1, Chap. 55), Machiavelli indicates that if the populace is not corrupt, public affairs are easily managed (Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, pp. 306–311). Machiavelli does not arrive at claims such as these by one particular empirical method. He does not reach general claims by employing any method of induction from a range of cases (Fleischer, 1995, pp. 333, 342). Moreover, he does not perform tests or experiments, nor does his work show any sign of systematical data collection (Viroli, 1998, pp. 1–2, 63, 81–83). In fact, Machiavelli never explains what he means specifically by his “new path” (see also Crick, 1984, pp. 48, 51; Garver, 1987, pp. 12–22; Strauss, 1953). If we observe what he actually does, we witness a series of approaches. Often, Machiavelli points out examples that illustrate and support his assertions, especially from the time of the Roman republic but not exclusively. He sometimes supplements these supporting observations with opposite examples that went awry. At other moments, he simply refers to his personal experience or suggests that his claim will be evident to anyone who has had any experience in the matter. In still other cases, he refers to evident implications of human nature. In the passages containing these examples, each of these approaches can be noted. Berlin seems to offer a fitting characterization when he writes the following concerning Machiavelli’s “approach”: “his method is a mixture of rules of thumb, observation, historical knowledge and general sagacity, somewhat like the empirical medicine of the pre-scientific world” (Berlin, 1955/2013, pp. 41–42; cf. Crick, 1984, p. 48; Wood, 1967).

Berlin certainly is correct in emphasizing the mixed method used by Machiavelli; yet in this characterization, he misses—or at least leaves implicit—several important aspects. First, for Machiavelli, gathering knowledge is closely related to learning and individual development.

As to the training of the mind, the prudent prince reads histories and observes in them the actions of excellent men, sees how they have conducted themselves in wars, observes the causes for their victories and defeats in order to escape the latter and imitate the former, above all, he does as some excellent men have done in the past; they selected for imitation some man earlier than themselves who was praised and honored. (The Prince, Chap. XIV; Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, pp. 56–57)

Knowledge relevant to government and administration, or “state craft,” as Machiavelli calls it (Letter of December 10, 1513, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 3, p. 930) has an empirical basis; however, there is more to it. It is always knowledge regarding how to act. This knowledge does not simply concern causes and effects, but, more precisely, also involves what one can do. Knowledge in statecraft must be action-oriented (Parel, 1972, p. 9). Furthermore, this knowledge considers how one should behave in war, political strife, and the like. This type of knowledge is not the type that can be grasped in general laws and universal rules. In the sphere of politics and administration, there are always exceptions. Machiavelli regularly mentions anomalies to his own guidelines (Viroli, 1998, p. 84). In this field, predictions are often off the mark (The Prince, Chapter XXV; Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 90). Second, knowledge for Machiavelli is contextual. He presents causal relationships, but one finds few general rules in his writings that are not qualified in some way. His approach to the art of political rule is not a “science of social engineering.” His observations regarding men and their behavior are always understood in terms of the specific context. (Germino, 1972, p. 74; Walker,
Machiavelli emphasizes often that statecraft does not involve the constant application of general rules but requires adapting to changing circumstances (e.g., Discourses III, 9, Gilbert, Vol. 1, p. 416; The Prince, Chapter XXV, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, pp. 89–92). Having knowledge, for Machiavelli, is closely related to being prepared for chance, the unpredictable, or fortune (The Prince, Chapter III, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 16; also see Cassirer, 1950, p. 157; Crick, 1984, pp. 53–54; Flanagan, 1972; Kontos, 1972, p. 84).

Third, this type of action-oriented contextual knowledge can be learned from the examples of great practitioners, not from theoretical writers and their general ideas. Machiavelli’s remarks regarding the new path or method he is following likely refer to this attention to the acts of real political actors (as they are presented by historians) instead of the books of philosophers (Fleischer, 1995; Viroli, 1998). To learn the craft of the state, one must imitate and follow the lead of actors who were exemplars of excellence in their fields: the great men and the successful republics. For Machiavelli, the political activity of the ancients occasionally exhibited political wisdom of the highest order (Discourses I, preface; Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 191; Discourses III 27, Gilbert, 1965/1999, p. 490; Fleischer, 1995, p. 331). He also saw virtuosi in the political arena of his own time, such as Borgia and Ferdinand of Aragon (The Prince, Chapter XXI, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 81). By interpreting these actions of others, one can sharpen one’s own judgment and develop one’s skills (Viroli, 1998, pp. 71, 94). It is important, therefore, to know what individuals excelling in statecraft did in particular circumstances to know what to imitate in what setting and to have the desire to gather and act on this knowledge (Fleischer, 1995, p. 336; Plamenatz, 1972, p. 164). Developing statecraft presupposes that one already has a particular attitude and a certain level of knowledge and skill. Machiavelli expresses this assumption when he writes (in the text cited at the beginning of this section) that it is his “purpose to write something useful to him who comprehends it” (The Prince, Chapter XXV, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 57). Thus, gathering knowledge, for Machiavelli, is not a matter of applying some method that can be expressed in an algorithm and that leads to empirical laws. Gathering knowledge is closely connected to developing individual excellence. Becoming a virtuoso in statecraft demands that one have certain virtues. The knowledge one can acquire in this field is not the same as in the natural sciences, nor can it be so precise and put into empirical laws. It can only be discerned from exemplary actions by experienced spectators and described in likely tendencies and precepts and maxims (Crick, 1984, p. 45; Parel, 1972, p. 10).

Machiavelli Versus Weber: Instruments and Aims

Machiavelli presents, for rulers and public officials, guidelines that are not deduced from philosophical or religious principles or drawn from classical authority; they obtain their support from empirical findings. These guidelines include examples of best practices (and evident failures) in ancient times and in his time. Machiavelli does not follow one particular method. His “new path” is eclectic and intended to teach the statecraft of the (ancient) virtuoso rulers to contemporary officials. This statecraft does not involve knowledge of general, universal laws and rules—the sphere of governing, inevitably, is one of uncertainty. It involves the skill to judge what actions will most likely bring results in a particular context. Max Weber makes similar points. Although he is more explicit on method (especially on verstehende Soziologie [interpretative sociology]), Weber, in fact, uses eclectic approaches in his writings that are
similar to Machiavelli’s. His claims rest on interpretations of meanings but also on arguments from structural factors. He also cites historical cases (ancient Egypt or China) and compares contemporary examples (such as the United States, England, and Germany); all of these examples are in “Politics as a Vocation” (Weber, 1961a, pp. 77–128). Like Machiavelli, Weber emphasizes the limits of law-like knowledge in this field. Therefore, he formulates his theories and definitions in terms of chance or likelihood (e.g., his definition of power). Yet there is also a clear difference between these writers on the first basic question of public administration. In Machiavelli, there is a clear and explicit link between acquiring knowledge and personal education or development: One who already has the relevant epistemic skills and virtues is able to discern the relevant causal relations and good examples.

**MACHIAVELLI’S EXPERT KNOWLEDGE**

Therefore nothing makes a republic so firm and solid as to give her such an organization that the laws provide a way for the discharge of the partisan hatreds that agitate her. (*Discourses* I 7, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 211)

The matter to be found here assures to a prudent and able ruler a chance to introduce a form that will bring him glory and her people [i.e., the people of Italy] general happiness. (*The Prince*, Chapter XXVI, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, pp. 92–93)

In the *Discourses*, *The Prince*, and *The Art of War*, Machiavelli provides maxims on what a ruler, a representative, a general, or any other public official should do to realize certain ends. Several examples were presented in the last section. Some scholars have characterized Machiavelli’s originality by calling him the founder of instrumental political thinking or of management expertise. He is said to have shown the way to considering the most effective and efficient means to realize the goals a current ruler happens to have. Cassirer uses a Kantian term when he calls Machiavelli’s counsels “hypothetical imperatives”; there is no question of whether the end is good but only of what one must do to attain it. Cassirer maintains that Machiavelli simply gives advice on political actions without blaming or praising “in the same way in which a physician describes the symptoms of a certain illness” (Cassirer, 1950, p. 154).

Machiavelli’s lessons have aroused much criticism. Some commentators have called him amoral or even immoral. This harsh judgment is triggered by the instrumental focus that many perceive in Machiavelli’s work. These critics are shocked by his willingness to exercise sheer brute force as an indispensable feature of good princely government and by his claim that princes should learn how to be not good—that is, be ready to abandon conventional (Christian) ethics if necessary (*The Prince*, Chapter XV, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol., p. 58; Skinner, 2002, pp. 144–146). Machiavelli, moreover, draws religion into the sphere of political instrumentalism when he notes that certain religions can be used to realize certain objectives of rulers and states. He asserts, furthermore, that the Christian faith poses a threat to a well-ordered society, because it motivates citizens to be more concerned with the afterlife than with making the best of this state of being (*Discourses* I 11, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 224; *Discourses* II 2, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol., p. 331; Skinner, 2002, pp. 156, 172, 180, 183). Ever since the early sixteenth century, these statements have led to characterizations of Machiavelli as “a teacher of evil,” “enemy of the human race,” and “anti-Christian,” and of *The Prince* as “satanic” and “the devil’s bible” (Parel, 1972, p. 16; Strauss, 1958, p. 9).
On closer review, however, the characterization as amoral or immoral is untenable. First, Machiavelli does not discard the value and reality of conventional virtues and religion. He maintains, for example, in *The Prince*, “I am aware that everyone will admit that it would be most praiseworthy for a prince to exhibit such of the above-mentioned qualities as are considered good [i.e., conventional virtues, such as being merciful, truthful, chaste, reliable]” (*The Prince*, Chapter XV, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 58). In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli endorses the value of three of the four cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, and courage (Skinner, 2002, pp. 154, 204, 207). He respects religion’s transcendent understanding that faith lies beyond the sphere of politics (Parel, 1972, p. 14). Machiavelli maintains that in the political sphere, these conventional values are not the only relevant considerations, and sometimes they must be overruled. However, he is not amoral, because he endorses these virtues; nor is he immoral, because he accepts their value (Berlin, 1955/2013; Parel, 1972; Skinner, 2002; Wood, 1972).

Second, it must be emphasized that the political sphere for Machiavelli is not marked by effective instruments for the arbitrary aims of rulers. Politics, for Machiavelli, involves undertaking actions for the common good. His lessons for rulers, administrators, and citizens, in fact, are not “hypothetical imperatives.” All the advice he gives can be understood as intended to contribute to particular goods. Even in *The Prince*, the work that most examines effective individual leadership, Machiavelli identifies the “general happiness of the people” as the ultimate end (see the quotation from *The Prince* at the beginning of this section). In the *Discourses*, we find a more elaborate concept of the common good. Some commentators have noted Machiavelli’s concern for the independence and continuity of the political community and for internal stability (Berlin, 1955/2013; McIntosh, 1984, pp. 184–185). Others scholars have focused on his concern for individual freedom guaranteed by the rule of law and the civic virtue of all citizens (Benner, 2009; Pocock, 1975; Plamenatz, 1972; Skinner, 2002; Viroli, 1998; Wolin, 1960; Wood, 1972; Yoran, 2010). Still other observers emphasize the democratic motive in his work (e.g., McCormick, 2011). This article is not the place to investigate Machiavelli’s understanding of the common good. In the scope of this article, it suffices to conclude that Machiavelli’s recommendations are not hypothetical imperatives on how to attain arbitrary goals, but are guidelines for realizing the common good. Machiavelli deviates from traditional advice books, or mirrors for princes, in his willingness to override conventional virtues and values. Yet he firmly belongs to this tradition because of his concern that rulers and administrators should focus on proper objectives (Skinner, 2002, p. 143). Returning to Cassirer’s analogy cited at the beginning of this section, it may be appropriate to compare statecraft with the art of the physician. Machiavelli often presents this analogy (e.g., *The Prince*, Chapter III; Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, pp. 16–17). However, Cassirer misses the point that physicians must know what is the proper end for which they employ their medical instruments (the life and well-being of their patients). On this point, Machiavelli expresses an analogous orientation for experts on statecraft.

**Machiavelli Versus Weber: What the Advisor Should Do**

Machiavelli’s many guidelines encompass knowledge of causal relations and proper objectives. These recommendations are not “hypothetical imperatives” but express a specific understanding of the common good. In presenting these guidelines and the arguments for them, Machiavelli offers us knowledge of effective instruments and an understanding of what we should strive
for. From Machiavelli’s perspective, knowledge and action are closely related. Knowledge is meant to be useful. Knowledge helps people decide how to act and instructs them how to act well. Each guideline offers its own particular advice; together, they help one to develop skills and the proper orientation. These guidelines help one develop into a virtu, a virtuoso ruler or administrator.

Weber, especially in his political writings, also presents advice and guidelines that clearly are inspired by a certain framework of values (Beetham, 1985; Lassman, 2000). Remarks in “Science as a Vocation” seem to make it inevitable for a scientist to work within this structure (Weber, 1961b, p. 144). However, when explicitly dealing with the issue of values, Weber remarkably emphasizes that a scientific advisor should be self-limited to present only causal knowledge. According to Weber, scientists as experts should be “intellectually honest,” and try to avoid specific values, because they have no authority in this field (Weber, 1961b, pp. 146–147. In Machiavelli, however, there is no such puzzling contradiction. He follows the tradition of the mirrors of princes: he shows the rulers their instruments and what their objectives should be (Skinner, 2002, p. 143).

MACHIAVELLI ON THE ROLE OF EXPERT ADVISORS

I see no other way than for an advisor to be moderate and not to seize upon any of the plans brought forward as his own undertaking, and to speak his opinion without passion, and without passion modestly to defend it, so that the city or the prince who follows it does it voluntarily, and does not seem to enter upon it as pushed by your urgency. (Discourses III 35, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 509)

No one, I hope, will think that a man of low and humble station is overconfident when he dares to discuss and direct the conduct of princes, because, just as those who draw maps of countries put themselves low down on the plain to observe the nature of mountains and places high above, and to observe that of low places put themselves high up on mountain tops, so likewise, in order to discern clearly the people’s nature, the observer must be a prince, and to discern clearly that of princes, he must be one of the populace. (The Prince, Dedication, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, pp. 10–11)

In his books, Machiavelli writes about the role of expert advisors and the way they should act toward powerholders. Yet these books are also intended as pieces of expert advice on the art of statecraft for individuals who rule or want to rule. If we want to understand Machiavelli’s position on this point, we must consider both aspects (Garver, 1987, p. 9). In The Prince, Machiavelli explains that to maintain popular support, statesmen or government administrators must demonstrate that they are able to obtain results, and results can only be achieved when rulers build their policies on the best knowledge available (The Prince, Chapters XV, XXV, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, pp. 57–59, 89–92; on the value of knowledge, see also Kontos, 1972, p. 88). A wise prince, therefore, seeks advice continuously (The Prince, Chapter XXIII, Gilbert Vol. 1, p. 87). The prince must ensure, however, that his advisors are not seeking their own benefit but can actually be relied on (The Prince, Chapter XXII, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 85). At the same time, the ruler must beware of flatterers. The prince, therefore, must give to his chosen advisors unrestricted power to tell him the truth. “With each of them he so bears himself that every adviser realizes that the more freely he speaks, the better he is received” (The Prince, Chapter XXIII, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 86).
The citation from the Discourses at the beginning of this section explains that the advisor should not only have relevant knowledge but also personal virtue. The advisor should bring his advice to the attention of a ruler or city but not manipulate them to accept what he considers right. Manipulation is improper, because the advisor should not make the decisions. The advisor’s role is to enlighten the decision-makers.

Machiavelli shows that a ruler must rely on expert advisors; however, he also makes clear that this is a complicated relationship. First, rulers sometimes are reputed to be prudent, not because of their own natures but because of the good advisors they have gathered around them. This opinion is mistaken, however. According to Machiavelli, “a prince who is not wise himself cannot be advised well.” The prince will neither be able to understand his advisors and unify their advice nor will he be able to control them (The Prince, Chapter XXIII, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 88; compare “those who know how to rule a kingdom, not those who, without knowing how, have the power to do it” in Discourses, Dedication, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 189). Thus, a ruler is in need of expert advisors. At the same time, the ruler himself must, in a sense, match their quality. The knowledge or wisdom of experts will exceed that of the ruler in some sense—otherwise, he would not need them—but the ruler should at least have the same level of knowledge or wisdom as his experts. The distinction between ruler and advisor on the point of expertise, then, is less strict than it might appear. Both rulers and advisors share—to some extent—the same sort of wisdom and expertise. All through his work, moreover, Machiavelli does not make too fine a distinction between the knowledge of the counselor and the knowledge of the prince; that is, between those who theorize and those who practice (Fleischer, 1995, p. 337). He himself, for example, writes The Prince and Discourses as advice for statesmen but presents his knowledge as that of an experienced statesman (ibid.; for explicit examples, see the dedications to both The Prince and Discourses).7

There is a second aspect to this complicated relationship. The distinction between ruler and advisor seems to be clear: the ruler holds power and has popular support; the advisor does not. For the ruler to show that he is in charge and competent, he must rely on advisors. However, this reliance puts him in the position of (seeming) dependency on the “real” power-holding expert. An expert who wants to offer advice must show both supremacy in expertise and with the assurance not to question the expertise of the ruler. Machiavelli shows himself to be well aware of this tension in, for example, the Dedication of The Prince cited at the beginning of this section. By comparing the position of the advisor to a mapmaker, Machiavelli tries to convince the addressee (Lorenzo de’ Medici) that he (Machiavelli) has a particular expertise to offer (view from below) while granting the ruler his own expertise (view from the hill) (The Prince, Dedication, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, 10–11). Machiavelli here uses a metaphor to make acceptable his claim that he is able to advise the ruler (on this tension, see also Garver, 1987, p. 7; cf. Hariman, 1989, p. 11). Machiavelli knows that speaking truth to power inevitably may be understood as questioning power.8

Machiavelli shows that anyone who acts as an expert advisor must be skilled in rhetoric and presentation. These skills are necessary to deal with the inevitable tension in the relation between ruler and advisor and important in fulfilling the role of an effective advisor. Many commentators have pointed out the rhetorical skills that Machiavelli employs—especially the commentators who most oppose his work. On the level of composition in his introductions, his presentation of arguments, and his use of language and style, Machiavelli shows himself a master of classical rhetoric (e.g., Garver, 1980; Hariman, 1989; Kahn, 1994; Strauss, 1958; Tinkler, 1988; Viroli, 1998). Doing
the best one can as an expert advisor involves using one’s skills to persuade the prince. Trying to change the government for the better demands that the advisor not limit himself to soberly delivering knowledge on demand. This clearly fits Machiavelli’s understanding of the type of knowledge the expert can provide (see section “Machiavelli’s Expert Knowledge” above); it is knowledge of instruments and objectives that can help the ruler to develop his judgment and his virtue in statecraft. As Viroli summarizes in his chapter on Machiavelli as a rhetorician: “Eloquence has the power to educate the mind to virtue” (Viroli, 1998, p. 110). Where universal causal laws or algorithms are virtually absent or of little use, and when the audience must be sensitized to particular objectives and values, the expert advisor must try to persuade the public to accept his interpretation of what is proper through clever communication. He must try to combine reason with eloquence, ratio with oratio. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, and other works to move his readers to pursue courses of action that he as an expert knew to be correct. Machiavelli exemplified how an expert advisor should proceed (Viroli, 1998, pp. 82, 97).

**Machiavelli Versus Weber: Knowledge and Power**

Machiavelli notes that rulers need expertise and expert advisors. Rulers should ensure that these experts neither flatter them nor give advice merely to serve their own interest. Machiavelli emphasizes that an expert advisor should also use his skills in rhetoric and persuasion. The advisor should use these skills, not to manipulate the powerholder to actions that suit the advisor’s interests, but to soften tensions and effectively educate the powerholder. Machiavelli makes a clear distinction between the roles and positions of rulers and expert advisors. However, on other points, he does not sharply distinguish the two. Both ruler and advisor should be skilled in rhetoric. The advisor, to some extent, has the same type of knowledge a powerholder has—or at least, that is what people believe, and that is the reason they give him their support. For this reason, an expert advisor can fulfill an advisory and educating role. Weber, when he explicitly addresses the issue, presents a simpler view concerning the two roles. The expert knows about facts and instruments; the decision-maker knows about values and objectives. The two roles should be kept separate (Weber, 1961b, p. 147). In contrast, Machiavelli presents a view whereby the two roles are different, yet similar and interconnected.

**CONCLUSION**

Machiavelli offers coherent answers to the three basic questions of the study of public administration. These answers convey that government and administration demand knowledge for action. An educated and experienced person can distinguish good from bad actions and learn from them. The knowledge involves effective instruments for realizing objectives in particular circumstances; the knowledge also concerns proper aims. These two aspects cannot be separated. An expert advisor counsels the decision-maker on individual actions, but at the same time supports the development of the decision-maker’s craft and virtue. The expertise of the advisor, therefore, resembles the expertise of the ruler or administrator. This overlap contributes to, but also threatens, the legitimacy of the ruler. From Machiavelli’s perspective, knowledge and
power (or the respective roles of the expert advisor and the decision-maker) do not coincide in one person, as in Plato’s _Republic_. However, knowledge and power are not as strictly separated as Weber would have it in “Science as a Vocation.” They meet in the middle, so to speak, between the advisor and the prince.

We can now conclude that in Machiavelli’s position, the puzzle we found in Weber is solved. The confusion resulted from Weber’s strict separation of roles—a distinction that he himself was not able to match. From Machiavelli’s perspective, the expert advisor to the powerholder must be well aware that he is not the legitimate decision-maker; that he should not manipulate to gain from his position; and that he should offer counsel to the best of his ability. However, in fulfilling his role, the advisor inevitably moves to the sphere that Weber wants to reserve strictly for rulers: his advice implies emphasizing objectives and values. The expert’s advice is even concerned with the virtue of the rulers and involves the typical political instrument of rhetoric.

According to the perspective Machiavelli provides, we can formulate lessons for the study of public administration; that is, for research, advice, and education in this field. A first lesson for research in the field of public administration is that its focus should be on practical knowledge, not on finding, testing, and refining general theories. These theories can provide little certainty and can be of little use in actual politics and administration. Second, although it is of little use to try to develop general theories, this does not mean that it is unnecessary or impossible to conduct research and learn in this field. The emphasis should be on the way to develop the skills to learn from past experiences. One should really concentrate on developing the skill to recognize good practices and exemplary actions. Furthermore, one should not only focus on contemporary actions and the newest fashions in government. One should also study actions and cases in history, even ancient history. Political and administrative knowledge is contextual; however, experiences from the (even distant) past can help sharpen judgment and insight.

Machiavelli’s perspective also provides lessons for scientific advisors. Conducting research implies making choices, not least about what to study. The expertise one has, therefore, inevitably expresses what one judges to be worthwhile to know and realize. It shows the intellectual honesty of the expert advisor when he expresses what he values and why. Giving advice, therefore, is not simply providing the instruments to effectively realize some given policy goal. Giving advice should also not be limited to counsel for particular cases. The advisor can also support decision-makers in developing their craft and virtue. Being able to fulfill these roles implies that the advisor has particular knowledge and rhetorical skills. These tasks make the role of the expert advisor highly responsible. An expert advisor in the field of public administration should be oriented to the common good. In an important way, the expert advisor is part of or moves within the sphere of politics and administration.

Finally, there are lessons to be learned for the organization of education in this field. Concern for research and the skill of making advice effective in leading to (the development of) the better judgment of decision-makers should be part of public administration curriculums. Ethics, both theoretical and practical, should not be a marginal but a central element of educational programs in this field. Ethics is necessary, because of the inevitable value-aspect of the choices that scientific advisors must make. Yet ethics is also important to address the tensions that are always part of expert advice and, therefore, of the study of public administration. Weber attempted to dispense with these tensions by making sharp distinctions—distinctions that cannot be maintained. Machiavelli demonstrates what it takes to accept this lesson.
NOTES

1. This article does not pretend to present a history of ideas. It does also not take on the task of situating each author in his particular time and circumstances—factors that might explain specific preoccupations or lines of argument. Plato, Weber, and Machiavelli are placed, so to speak, in a transtemporal conversation. The basic presupposition of this article is that thinkers from other times still have relevance for contemporary administration, leadership, and the study thereof.

2. A note on reading and interpreting Machiavelli: The range and quantity of scholarly interpretations are enormous (on this point, e.g., see Berlin, 1955/2013; Parel, 1972). In this article, I will not try to present a novel interpretation of his work. I will rely on a comprehensive group of authors who offer mainstream interpretations. On the issues where interpretations strongly differ, I will show the variety of views. All references to Machiavelli’s works are to the three-volume edition by Allan Gilbert (1965/1999).

3. This does not mean, however, that Machiavelli did not know his classics. He was, for example, well-versed in De Officiis (The Duties of the Ruler) by Cicero, and without mentioning him, Machiavelli evidently comments on Cicero in his lessons to statesmen (Barlow, 1999; Colish, 1978).

4. This does not mean, of course, that Machiavelli might not be influenced on particular issues by ancient or Christian ideas, metaphors, or concepts. Here we merely claim, in line with the mainstream understanding of Machiavelli’s work, that he does not deduce his lessons for statesmen from one encompassing metaphysics or religion. For further reading on Machiavelli’s relation to (Christian) religion and his use of religious arguments and symbols, see de Grazia (1989), Nederman (2009), Parel (1991), Strauss (1958), and Viroli (2010).

5. In connecting knowledge and virtue, Machiavelli remains close to the ancient understandings as found in Plato and Aristotle (e.g., Blanchard, 1996). His approach, however, also strongly resembles recent writings on virtue epistemology. (On virtue epistemology, see Fairweather & Zagzebski, 2001; Roberts & Wood, 2007). For reasons of limited space, I will not dwell on these resemblances here.

6. In fact, one might maintain that Machiavelli also gives the fourth virtue, justice, its due, albeit more implicitly. In the course of The Prince, and more clearly in the Discourses, the aim of politics is related to realizing the common good (see below).

7. As Viroli indicates, Machiavelli clearly presents himself in his books and letters as a self-sure advisor with self-esteem who is proud of his knowledge and his autonomy (Viroli, 1998, p. 42).

8. The metaphor that Machiavelli uses here is at odds with what he writes elsewhere on his expertise and ambitions. Earlier, in the dedication to The Prince, for example, he refers to his own longtime experience in public office (i.e., the view from the hill) as the basis of his expertise, not to his membership in the populace (The Prince, Dedication, Gilbert, 1965/1999, Vol. 1, p. 10). Rhetoric may make certain tensions bearable or acceptable, but it does not dissolve them.

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