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# *The Advisor*: Counsel, Concealment, and Machiavelli's Voice

**Rob Goodman**[1], Columbia University

**Abstract**

Machiavelli's political works should be read not only as attempts to shape princely behavior, but as demonstrations of a model of advisory behavior. They are a performance of advice-giving, of the dispassionate, scientistic – but also quietly radical – behavior Machiavelli expects of those tasked with speaking to power. This model's central feature is concealment of argument and rhetorical intent, a feature inherited from classical rhetoric but put to newly expansive use. This article turns from Machiavelli's appropriation of the "mirror" literature's concept of flattery, a kind of counter-ideal of advisory behavior, to his development of the classical rhetoric of self-effacement. It argues that he puts this rhetorical tradition to newly expansive use – not as a proto-scientist of politics but as a dynamic political actor in his own right – inventing ostensibly neutral dilemmas, classifications, and frames to guide the ruler-reader, as if voluntarily, toward some of his most distinctive conclusions.

Keywords: Machiavelli, Cicero, rhetoric, advice, flattery, framing, rhetorical redescription, "mirrors for princes"

Niccolò Machiavelli's political works, especially *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*, speak both to rulers and past them.[2] Simultaneously, they announce, "here is how the powerful should behave," and "here is how to behave toward the powerful" (see Williams, 2005: 57). And while these books are both treatises on politics, and model addresses to rulers and would-be rulers, they are more studied in the former capacity than in the latter. In this article, without denigrating the value of reading Machiavelli for his more explicit political

teachings, I intend to read him in that latter capacity. In other words, I want to call attention to the ways in which Machiavelli's works can be approached not only as attempts to shape a model of princely behavior, but as demonstrations of a model of advisory behavior. I read them not simply as advice, but as a performance of advice-giving, of the disciplined, dispassionate, scientistic – but also quietly influential and even radical – behavior Machiavelli expects of those tasked with speaking to power (on Machiavelli's works as performance, see Ascoli, 1993: 220). The central feature of this behavior is concealment and indirection in argument – a feature that Machiavelli inherited from the tradition of classical rhetoric but put to newly expansive use.

In his career as diplomat-bureaucrat-advisor, Machiavelli frequently tested the limits of his independence.[3] But the attention that Machiavelli paid to advisory language and practice need not be treated as a mere byproduct of his professional history; in grappling with questions of counsel, he was dealing with a political problem of increasing salience. If, as Michael Oakeshott (1962: 23–25) has argued, the inexperience of new princes created a demand for the succinct guide to ruling they found in *The Prince*, we might ask whether the growth in Machiavelli's era of civil services, diplomatic corps, and professional advisory ranks generated a similar demand for models of advising. If Machiavelli was the theorist of the new prince and the new republic, he was also the theorist of the advisory institutions that grew alongside them.[4]

In this reading, Machiavelli's work stands as a reminder that actions too often marked as innocuous or merely factual, such as classifying, advising, or demonstrating expertise, are themselves important sites of power.[5] Methodologically, this article speaks to the value of reading Machiavelli and other writers in the history of political thought with an eye not only to their substantive pronouncements, but to the ways in which questions of voice, tone, and form illuminate their central concerns. It also highlights Machiavelli's profound debt to the tradition of classical rhetoric, a debt that is obscured if we dwell on his handful of explicit criticisms of Cicero at the expense of his far more pervasive assimilation of Cicero's rhetorical practice.

My argument proceeds in three parts. First, I consider how Machiavelli clears the ground for a distinctive ideal of advisory behavior by rejecting a counter-ideal that dominated the "mirrors for princes" literature: the stock figure of the flatterer. Machiavelli does not discard the concept of flattery, but he appropriates it, turning it from a moral harm to a kind of essentially ineffectual speech – a conception of the problem of flattery much more similar to a Ciceronian orator's than a moralist's. Second, I ask what this formulation of the problem tells us about Machiavelli's solution: I examine the rhetorical tradition's influences on Machiavelli, focusing on the concealment of argument and the self-effacement of the orator (tools that anticipate the modern concept of framing) as means for rendering speech more effective in the face

of a skeptical audience. Third, I illustrate how his model of advisory behavior, as performed in his political works, puts these framing tools to powerful use, constructing ostensibly neutral dilemmas, classifications, and representations that guide the ruler-reader, as if voluntarily, toward some of Machiavelli's most radical conclusions.

## I. Two Conceptions of Flattery

To better understand Machiavelli's ideal of the advisor, we might begin by investigating its opposite, or its counter-ideal: the flatterer. Machiavelli concurred with a wide range of his predecessors and contemporaries – especially in the tradition of the "mirrors for princes" literature that competed with Machiavelli's own works – in ascribing enormous destructive power to the figure of the flatterer, the worst case of the self-interested advisor. Flattery, as the longstanding tradition had it, held the capacity to fatally corrupt the ruler and endanger the entire state (Regier, 2007: 10; Stengel, 2000: 143–144; Vanderhoof, 2004: 186). In this tradition, one's model of advisory behavior or of the ideal courtier is best understood as one's proposed means for avoiding the political harms of flattery. And more importantly, different conceptions of flattery imply different solutions. In fact, Machiavelli did embrace a specific and distinctive conception of flattery; examining this conception helps to explain how Machiavelli's model of advisory behavior was distinctive in its own right.

While Machiavelli shared the longstanding conviction that flattery was a harm, he took a rhetorically-inflected position on the questions of how and why flattery was harmful. In fact, we can identify two competing conceptions of flattery and its harms; we can call them the moralist's flattery and the orator's flattery. Each conception imagines a counter-ideal, and implies an ideal, of advisory behavior. In dissenting from the moralistic account of flattery's harms, Machiavelli was also developing an account of a new model advisor. His redefinition of flattery is as consequential, in its way, as his reappropriation of "*virtù*."

In the moralist's conception of flattery, descending from Plato's *Gorgias* and flowing into the "mirror" literature, flattery is a problem precisely because it leaves its audience's worst tendencies uncriticized. Conversely, its ideal case of counsel might look something like Plato at the court of Dionysius – the advisor as master of *paideia*, or "civic moral education" (Rahe, 1992: 266).

In the orator's conception, on the other hand, flattery is a kind of self-negating speech. As Eugene Garver (1987: 7) puts it in his study of Machiavelli and the rhetorical tradition, flattering speech is characterized by a kind of flexibil-

ity that accommodates itself to the existing opinions of the audience – and yet it always runs the risk of being so flexible as to become entirely passive. "How can an orator base his presentation on what his audience already believes, yet persuade them to do what *he* wants, not what they already want?" Because flattery confirms existing opinion, it changes precious little – it is rhetorically inert. True, such speech may temporarily raise the speaker in an audience's esteem; but pure flattery is a waste of language if an orator also has goals external to his own standing.[6] At the end of this section, I will discuss what Machiavelli's recovery of this counter-ideal implies for his advisory model.

While the moralistic conception of flattery was dominant in the "mirror" literature, Machiavelli departs from it in three ways.

First, the moralist's conception saw flattery as an attack on the ruler's character, one that functioned by indiscriminately doling out praise and suppressing criticism. Thus, an essay in Plutarch's *Moralia* holds that flatterers "with their praises pierce to the man's character" by deviously undermining the traditional virtues (1969: 301–303). Borrowing from Thucydides, he writes that these debauched habits result in "prodigality being called 'liberality,' cowardice 'self-preservation,'" and so on. Christian writers continued to view flattery as an essentially moral harm. For Aquinas, in *De regno*, tyrants are "puffed up by the wind of pride [and] the flattery of men." (1949: 50). And Machiavelli's contemporaries carried that tradition into his own time. In *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1963: 194), Erasmus characterizes flattery as "perverting the mind of the prince with biased talk and ignoble complaisance to those things which are unworthy of a prince"; such corruption of the princely character is serious enough to merit the death penalty. Finally, Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* builds on the same tradition: "The abundance of [rulers'] enjoyments are drowned in pleasures, and so they deceive themselves and have their minds so corrupted – always finding themselves obeyed and almost adored" (1903: 248).

By contrast, consider Machiavelli's view of flattery's dangers. For one, the princely quality that he presents as the most fragile, and whose corruption he insists carries the highest stakes, is not the state of the ruler's soul, but the ruler's capacity to make useful inferences about the political world under the conditions of uncertainty that are endemic to political rule.[7] While he does argue that republics are more resistant to *Fortuna*'s vicissitudes than principalities (see, *Discourses on Livy*, 3.9) his examples of failures of inference are richly drawn from both forms of government, and are scattered throughout both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. The ruler is not simply confronted at intervals with uncertain questions: *as a condition of ruling*, he is subject to powerful cognitive biases and is in a perpetual state of uncertainty on several levels. These biases include unjustified optimism, the difficulty of imagining that today's source of success can be tomorrow's cause of failure, and even the deep uncertainty

brought about by the "oblivion of things" that obscures and falsifies reliable historical knowledge (See *Discourses on Livy*, 2.5, 2.8, 2.25, 2.27, 2.29, 3.48; *The Prince*, ch. 25).

And so, in this light, it is especially telling that the chapter dedicated to flattery in *The Prince* portrays it as weakening the prince at his most vulnerable point – his inferential ability. It does so by confining him in the proverbial "bubble" of his pre-existing beliefs, exacerbating this drift toward blindness. In *The Prince*'s chapter on flattery, the ruler's objective is to resist the tendency toward political insulation, and to do so, he "should be a very frequent questioner, and then…a patient listener to the truth." He ought to express his dissatisfaction if he finds that he is denied the truth "for any reason"; coming in the midst of a discussion on informed decision-making, it seems clear that the considerations that matter most here have to do with matters of state. For Machiavelli, the most relevant form of flattery conceals news and opinions that challenge the prince's own views, which a wise prince avoids by resolving to "ask [chosen advisors] about everything.… Anyone who does otherwise… comes to ruin because of the flatterer." (*Prince*, ch. 23).

Second – because Machiavelli's version of the flatterer is no longer a stock figure of evil who intends merely to "derive profit" for himself (Castiglione, 1903: 248) – the work of resisting him involves compromise and tradeoffs. For writers in the "mirror" tradition, recognizing the flatterer is synonymous with defeating him – the moment one realizes one is being flattered, the spell is broken. For Plutarch (1969: 349), we could resist flattery "if, in obedience to the god, we learn…the precept, 'Know thyself.'" For Erasmus (1963: 194), the prince should be trained from an early age to identify flattery, and flatterers should be publicly punished. Suppressing flattery carries no disadvantages.

Here again, Machiavelli's treatment is considerably more complex. The most obvious antidote to flattery – complete liberty of speech toward the ruler – is as dangerous as the disease: "Wishing to defend oneself from [flattery] brings the danger of becoming despised.…When anyone can tell you the truth, you lose respect" (*Prince*, ch. 23). Whatever he gains in truth, a ruler who exposes himself to open criticism and unlimited contradiction will be esteemed virtually worthless: a danger that is not simply personal, but public. So Machiavelli proposes what we could call a paradox of flattery: too little directness in counsel undermines the state; too much directness in counsel also undermines the state.

Third and finally, resistance to flattery requires better bureaucratic design rather than a moral awakening. Where other writers in the flattery tradition find a clear solution in self-awareness, self-knowledge, and humility; Machiavelli seeks a structural solution to an amoral problem. He resolves the flattery paradox not by proposing that rulers be better people, but by proposing that

they develop better modes of governing. Instead than erring too far toward self-protection or reckless openness, "a prudent prince should follow a third course, electing wise men for his state and giving only them permission to speak truthfully to him, and only on such matters as he asks them about and not on other subjects" (*Prince*, ch. 23).

But if we can establish that Machiavelli departs from the moralist's conception of flattery – with its emphasis on the character-centered harm of flattery, and on resistance to flattery as a kind of cost-free moral awakening – can we also substantiate the claim that his conception has more in common with what I called the orator's conception? I believe that we can, especially when we consider Machiavelli's account of the advisor's unique dilemma: discovering a form of speech that is neither overly direct nor overly passive.

Machiavelli is well aware that overly direct speech, or unvarnished truth, can mean punishment or even death for the advisor; twice in book 3 of the *Discourses* (chapters 2 and 35), he reiterates these dangers. Yet a strategy of passivity is worthless in its own right: "to be silent and not to say their opinion… would be a useless thing to the republic or to their prince, and they would not escape the danger" (*Discourses*, 3.35). Machiavelli assimilates passivity and flattery: he argues that rulers are susceptible to flattery because "men delight so much in their own concerns, deceiving themselves in this manner"– that is, because they want their existing concerns to be ratified, and because a passive or fearful counselor will do just that (*Prince*, ch. 23). In other words, Garver's summation of the orator's problem with flattery seems to be well in line with Machiavelli's conception of the problem: advisors want to save their own skin, but also to counsel "the things that appear to them useful" so as not to "fail in their office" (*Prince*, ch. 23). The difficulty lies in doing both at the same time, speaking inoffensively enough to avoid the ruler's sanction, but not so inoffensively as to accomplish nothing for the state.

In fact, Machiavelli's sole concrete instance of a flattered ruler, Emperor Maximilian, dramatizes this difficulty – because while the emperor is surrounded by flatterers, their influence on him is also (contra the "mirror" tradition) markedly circumscribed. On the one hand, the emperor is always "drawn away from his plans." On the other, "those things he achieves in one day he destroys during the next, and no one ever understands what he wishes or plans to do": the image here is one of a self-willed and unpredictable ruler (qualities that Machiavelli values in other contexts), but not one whose will is subject to that of others. We might resolve the tension here by observing that the advisors' influence is limited to the range of opinions and concerns that the emperor already possesses; though his advisors flatter him, they are only free to steer him within the constraints of the opinions that already exist, not to achieve any kind of novelty. His advisors are not evil men, as the moralistic conception would have it – but they are ineffective orators.

Machiavelli is after a higher order of influence than this – and so, he claims, are any advisors who do not "fail in their office." But this is just where the challenges facing the Machiavellian advisor mount. He must, like any rhetorician, maintain at least some contact with the ruler's existing concerns and opinions, while bringing new concerns and opinions to the fore. And if he is to decisively influence the state, he must do so without dangerously challenging the very authority on which on which the advisor's own position and the state's stability depend.

Machiavelli gives his fullest response to these challenges in book 3, chapter 35 of the *Discourses*:

> I do not see any other way for it but to take things moderately, and not to seize upon any of them for one's own enterprise, and to give one's opinion without passion and defend it without passion, with modesty, so that if the city or the prince follows it, it follows voluntarily, and it does not appear to enter upon it drawn by your importunity. (*Discourses,* 3.35)

This passionless advice is much more provocative, and much more central to Machiavelli's authorial performance, than it might seem at first glance. And I would contend that Machiavelli does not merely state this advice for advisors: with his dry and often dilemmatic voice, he demonstrates and enacts it. Before unpacking it, though, it is important to investigate how the classical tradition that shaped his education and his political thought responded to challenges quite similar to those that face the Machiavellian advisor, to understand how Machiavelli's ideal advisor echoes Cicero's ideal orator, and then to examine the ways in which Machiavelli builds on and refines his classical precedents (on rhetorical, Ciceronian, and Quintilianic influences on Machiavelli's education, see Gilbert, 1965: 318–322; Skinner, 1981: 4–5; Kahn, 1994: 16–18; Stacey, 2014: 189–212). Briefly, I argue that Machiavelli found a valuable antidote to flattery – conceived of as ineffective, inert, or overly passive speech – in the rhetorical traditions of concealed argument. In fact, one of Machiavelli's understatedly radical moves is jettisoning Cicero the stoicizing moralist (who denounces flattery in the traditional way in *De officiis*, 1.91), but retaining the influence of Cicero the orator (see Zerba, 2012: 184–207).

## II. Framing and Its Limits

Above, Machiavelli seems to hit on the *ne plus ultra* of persuasion: a state in which the persuaded audience perceives itself as having acted voluntarily, appears to itself to have not been persuaded at all. In a sense, the ora-

tor's aspiration to invisibility is the inverse of the orator's notion of flattery: if the latter, at its extreme, wins esteem for the orator but effects no changes in the audience, the former effects a great deal but effaces the orator. And it was an ancient commonplace of the rhetorical tradition that the highest art is the effacement of art: we find it in Cicero (too much ingenuity "can give rise to a suspicion of preparation"), in Quintilian (rhetoric's "highest expression will be in the concealment of its existence"), in Longinus ("art is only perfect when it looks like Nature, and Nature succeeds only by concealing art"), and in a host of others (see Miller 2013).[8] Of course, because concealment is itself an art, these pronouncements were usually accompanied by a wealth of strategies for covering one's rhetorical tracks and turning the ingenious ingenuous.

Of these strategies, one of the most powerful is a purportedly neutral statement about the world that turns out to function as a concealed argument. Such statements are often studied under the heading of "framing"; and at the risk of anachronism, I will briefly note some modern formulations of this concept before discussing its classical antecedents.

Extensive evidence indicates the influence of "decision frames" on opinion formation: "(often small) changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce (sometimes large) changes of opinion." For instance, considerably more survey respondents were willing to increase public spending described as "assistance to the poor" than were willing to increase public spending described as "welfare" (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 104, 111). Just as a single issue is subject to various frames, a debate, agenda, or decision situation may itself be framed through a selective presentation of the options under consideration; in some cases, limiting the range of conceivable alternatives can powerfully "confine the scope of decision-making" (Lukes, 2005: 22; Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: 7). In the rhetorical tradition of the artful effacement of art, such frames would seem to be most effective not when they are perceived as arguments – which are always subject to dispute – but when, and as long as, they are able to pass as "objective" representations of the issue or controversy at hand.

Such methods have ancient precedents. Consider, for instance, Cicero's long experience in framing the terms of debates, especially in a kind of dilemmatic framing designed to highlight the crux of a controversy – and often to identify that crux in such a way as to put one's own case in the best possible light. In Cicero's dialogue *De oratore*, the orator Antonius takes for granted that speakers will frequently structure their arguments in terms of binaries – "good and evil, the things to be pursued and avoided, honorable or base, expedient or inexpedient" – choosing the relevant pair and then claiming for themselves the former member. Rhetorical binaries like these were an inheritance from Aristotle; but whereas Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1.3.5)

presumed that the relevant pair would be dictated by the genre of oratory – so that deliberative oratory will revolve around the question of expediency/inexpediency, judicial oratory around justice/injustice, and epideictic oratory around honor/dishonor – Cicero's Antonius proposes a more unsettling refinement.

In his view, the very terms of debate are debatable. Quite often, the question at stake is not which course is most honorable, or which course is most expedient, but "whether the honorable or the expedient deserves more consideration." Such a rhetorical conflict is not a dispute within fixed terms, but a struggle over two competing dilemmas, or over two competing frames. The speaker who frames the debate in terms of expediency/inexpediency "will enumerate the advantages of peace, of prosperity, power, money… as well as the disadvantages of their opposites." The speaker whose preferred frame is honor/dishonor "will amplify the importance of being immortalized by posterity," and so on (Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.67, 2.335). But just as important is what is omitted. Antonius does not expect either speaker to make an explicit claim that his own frame is best; each will simply enumerate goods within his frame. In other words, the argument that matters most in this instance is barely an argument at all, or rather, it is a kind of argument by implication. Neither speaker argues that the debate *ought* to be viewed in a given way; each simply speaks as if his chosen frame *is* already the "objectively" correct one, and competes to make his presumption the more vivid.

In his own rhetorical practice, Cicero found that such strategic framing of choices could serve as a valuable, if often specious, tool for forcing arguments down favorable paths. For example, in his defense of Aulus Cluentius Habitus, Cicero discusses allegations that his client bribed a jury in these terms: "Suppose it is agreed that the court was bribed: it must have been bribed either by Habitus or by Oppianicus [his opponent]. If I show that it was not bribed by Habitus, I shall have proved that it was bribed by Oppianicus; if I show that it was bribed by Oppianicus, Habitus is off the hook" (Cicero, *Pro Cluentio* 64). But as J. G. F. Powell (2013: 66) notes, this dilemma, which appears at first glance to offer an exhaustive statement of the conceivable options, in fact does not: it studiously omits the possibility that both sides tried to bribe the jury, in which case the promised incrimination of Oppianicus would not acquit Habitus (see also Craig, 1993). While this dilemmatic framing operates on a level much less abstract than that of the variety described in *De oratore*, it similarly aims to limit the range of the conceivable, and to conceal its persuasive power under an offer of choice.[9]

Of course, this strategic construction of choices was hardly the only variety of framing practiced in classical rhetoric. Another was rhetorical "redescription," or the calculated substitution of one normative term for another, a practice whose classical origins and persistence into the rhetorical handbooks of the

early modern era have been examined in great detail by Quentin Skinner. In his words, redescription may "be said to consist of replacing a given evaluative description with a rival term that serves to picture the action no less plausibly, but serves at the same time to place it in a contrasting moral light," as in the epidemic of reclassifying virtues and vices that accompanied the Corcyrean civil war in Thucydides's history (*Peloponnesian War*, 3.82; see Skinner, 2002: 183). Yet another precedent for framing in the classical tradition is its treatment of rhetorical *colores*, which came to refer to an orator's construction of the facts of a case, or to an attempt to shift a dispute to more favorable ground (Roller, 2001: 16–18).[10]

An essential source of these practices' effectiveness is concealment. To turn any of these frames into *explicit* arguments – for Antonius's hypothetical orator, for instance, to explain why expediency happens to be a better criterion for the case than honor – is to invite contradiction and, just as importantly, to raise the defenses of one's audience. By contrast, the implied claim of the self-effacing orator is that the audience has nothing to defend against. Why would we need to defend ourselves against a representation of the world, or against an invitation to exercise our own judgment? Such an orator, in the words of Carolyn R. Miller (2013: 24), "treats communicative relations as cooperative rather than adversarial," and in fact uses the cooperative stance toward adversarial ends; he or she is merely the audience's advocate and advisor.

And yet, as powerful as these tools of framing and this self-effacing stance may be, they are limited by the rhetorical situation itself. The orator's self-effacement is never complete and is always subject to challenge. Simply because he or she does have to advocate for a position (or else is not engaged in rhetoric at all), his or her choice of frames is permanently liable to exposure as bound to that position. The presence of an opposing orator is often enough, in itself, to call the accuracy or neutrality of any frame into question, preventing it from standing as the last, unchallenged word. But even leaving the opposing orator aside, an audience that recalls that it is in a rhetorical situation – that the orator, to put it bluntly, *wants something* – has already undermined much of the work of concealment. This danger helps to explain "how pervasive the theme of suspicion is in the classical tradition" – that is, the audience's suspicion of the orator (Miller, 2013: 22). And this suspicion raises the possibility that an audience accustomed to look *at* a rhetorical performance might on occasion look *through* it, with a resistance to persuasion and a skeptical eye to the ways in which the orator's frames serve the orator's ends (Lanham, 1976: 30, 84, 182). No rhetorician yet has ever been able to forestall that possibility for good. But Machiavelli comes remarkably close.

## III. Machiavelli as Model Advisor

Machiavelli, too, is interested in a kind of concealment: just as effective rulers will often conceal their natures from the public, effective advisors will often conceal their preferences and passions from rulers. In this section, I read Machiavelli's political works as a model and performance of advisory behavior that offers a solution to the problem of flattery – ineffective or passive speech – from the perspective of the advisor, without frontally challenging the authority of the ruler, who must "not appear to enter upon [a policy] drawn by your importunity." Much like the classical precursors to decision framing that I discussed above, Machiavelli develops a wide range of devices for concealing judgment and argument. Perhaps the most prevalent of these is his remarkably frequent recourse to dilemmatic (or trilemmatic) statements; a framing device that was used relatively sparingly in Cicero becomes Machiavelli's defining authorial tic.[11] But I also consider his practice of rhetorical redescription, as well as his practice of a kind of argument by implication, which lends credence to the thought that the advisor, and not just the ruler, must learn to add *colore* to his statements and actions (on Machiavelli's use of *colore*, see Rebhorn 1988: 113). Finally, I consider the way in which he most exceeds the classical tradition: in constructing an advisory role that brings rhetorical self-effacement to new heights. Machiavelli quite nearly obviates the limits on framing that I just discussed. Nearly every classical rhetorician denies, at some point, being a rhetorician; Machiavelli's model advisor, who is a supreme rhetorician, is equipped to make the old denial with newfound plausibility.

First, consider Machiavelli's dilemmatic habit of speech and thought, which, as even a casual reader is likely to discover, dominates Machiavelli's work. Machiavelli opens *The Prince* with a chapter of six disjunctive statements in a single paragraph, setting a tone that he maintains throughout. A small sample of such statements demonstrates the point: "Dominions taken in this way are either accustomed to living under a prince or are used to being free; and they are gained either by the arms of others or by one's own, either through Fortune or through virtue"; prophets are either armed or unarmed; "a principality is brought about either by the common people or by the nobility"; "a prince either spends his own money and that of his subjects, or that of others"; "the prince who is more afraid of his people than of foreigners should build fortresses, but one who is more afraid of foreigners than his people should do without them" (*Prince*, ch. 1, 6, 9, 16, 20).

As in *The Prince*, a disjunctive pattern is established immediately in the *Discourses*: "I say that all cities are built either by men native to the place where they are built or by foreigners." And again, the book is rich with similar constructions: those who would rule "do not know how to be altogether wicked

or altogether good"; "the vice of ingratitude arises either from avarice or from suspicion"; growing a city "is done in two modes: by love and by force"; "one [kind of war] is made through the ambition of princes or of republics…. The other kind of war is when an entire people… goes to seek a new seat"; "which is the better policy… to await the enemy inside [your] own borders or to go out to meet him?"; "subjects should be either benefited or eliminated (*Discourses* 1.1, 1.6, 1.26, 1.29, 2.3, 2.8, 2.12, 2.23)."[12]

We find the same pattern in *The Art of War*: for instance, "towns and citadels can be strong either by nature or by industry" (7.1.). And again, we see it in the *History of Florence*: "great offenders ought either to remain untouched, or be destroyed"; "citizens acquire reputation and power in two ways; the one public, the other private… and in proportion as influence [privately] acquired is injurious, so is the former beneficial" (4.7, 7.1; see also 3.3).

If this habit of thought has long been recognized in the secondary literature, it has also received surprisingly little examination. We are likely to find ample reference in that literature to "the classical Machiavellian aut-aut," "his dilemmatic technique of invariably putting forward the two extreme and antithetical solutions," the "typically Machiavellian rattle of antitheses," "*la forma dilemmatica*," or the "disjunction [which] sorts all of the events into two mutually exclusive and jointly comprehensive categories" (Whitfield, 1947: 44; Chabod, 1960: 127; Pocock, 1975: 158; Marchand, 1975: 23–25; Hariman, 1995: 38). What we are far less likely to find is a sustained consideration of just what this compulsive sorting does, of the role it plays in Machiavelli's rhetoric and theory of advice. J. H. Whitfield, J. G. A. Pocock, and Sebastian De Grazia treat it as a curiosity, worth only a brief mention. Federico Chabod discusses it in greater detail, linking it to a Machiavellian conception of virtue in which "nothing is more pernicious than obscure or slow and tardy deliberation" – deliberation that the crisp either/or is designed to streamline. Where this view goes wrong, I would argue, is in taking Machiavelli's dilemmas at face value, in treating them as "comprehensive" statements that encompass the entire range of possible action (Chabod, 1960: 128, 148). And while Machiavelli often portrays his binaries as mere facts about the world, I would cast doubt on any inference from Machiavelli's dispassionate tone that he offers a scientific account of political reality, "in the same way as a chemist studies chemical reactions" (Cassirer, 1946: 154).

On the contrary, my argument gives us reason to be skeptical of claims that Machiavelli is practicing political science in any neutral sense. For one, consider how Machiavelli's authorial voice meets the political imperatives he finds in the advisor's chancy situation – and in doing so, how it displays Machiavelli's principles in practice. He urges the advisor "not to seize upon [matters] for one's own enterprise," and an advisor who presents himself as conscientious of alternatives, and even as merely offering choices, has a plausible defense

against charges of self-interested prodding. He insists that an advisor should "give one's opinion without passion and defend it without passion," and the advisor can best convey dispassion by presenting himself as one who considers and weighs each competing claim – who acts almost as an instrument of measurement.

And yet the rhetorical tradition ought to remind us of the many ways in which an offer of choice, or a classification of political reality, can be anything but neutral – just as the act of asking "is this policy expedient or inexpedient?" can be an effort to shift a debate to favorable ground, or the act of instructing a jury that the question at stake is the guilt of Habitus or Oppianicus can be an effort to elide the possibility of mutual guilt. In the same way, Machiavelli's disjunctive style is, on important occasions, a demonstration of the ways in which the construction of choices can act as a source of concealed judgment and concealed power.

Dilemmatic framing plays a key role at an early crux of both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. For one, *The Prince's* crucial introductory binary – principalities are either established or new – is deceptively exhaustive. Questions of purpose are abandoned; questions of possession are all. As Chabod writes (in a way that would seem to qualify his statement about "comprehensive" dilemmas), Machiavelli "does not enquire… as to the nature of the State, its origin and its aims. Hence, we find no hint of the traditional arguments, prevalent both before and since, about the origins of human society and the 'why and wherefore' of the State" (Chabod, 1960: 144; see also Strauss, 1958: 70). The immediate claim that some distinctions between principalities are meaningful and some are best ignored is a quiet but far-reaching statement of intent, shunting aside by mere implication a host of the traditional concerns and agendas of politics and political theory.[13]

Second, near the outset of the *Discourses* (1.6), the crucial question is whether a republic ought to be equipped for self-contained defense, as in the case of Sparta or Venice, or for imperial expansion, as in the case of Rome. Stated like that, the dilemma is a close-run thing. Because Machiavelli shows the Sparta/Venice model to be safe against the two kinds of aggression waged on a republic (in a kind of subsidiary disjunction), it appears to win the argument: "Without a doubt I believe that if the thing could be held balanced in this mode, it would be the true political way of life and the true quiet of a city." But Machiavelli has sown the seeds of a radical and last-second reversal.

To this point, it appeared that neither of the options under consideration, quietism or imperialism, represented any kind of *balance*; on the contrary, these were "the two extreme and antithetical solutions." Suddenly, one of the alternatives has been demoted to a compromise, an often fatal position in Machiavellian reasoning (Coby, 1999: 228–237). Even in the absence of foreign aggression, the Sparta/Venice model is found to be unsustainable, a well-

spring of "effeminacy," division, or both – yet Machiavelli does not here raise the possibility that the Roman model might be unstable in any comparable way, even though one might expect a policy of constant expansionism to be the riskier and more destabilizing of the two. Instead, what bears the weight of the argument is his claim that "one cannot, as I believe, balance this thing, nor maintain this middle way exactly," especially given that "all things of men are in motion." What does the work is the transformation of the Sparta/Venice model from one of a pair of antithetical solutions into a weak and unstable middle way. That model is evidently a middle way because it aims at the compromise of permanent *virtù* with the unwillingness to provoke the war that is *virtù's* necessary condition; and if this is the middle term, then the true range of choice appears to extend from the republic without the *virtù* to meet the "necessity" of war, which "come[s] to ruin," to the republic with the *virtù* to meet necessity and "conserve what it has seized." In other words, Machiavelli has, in the span of less than a paragraph, recast the conceivable options from "Sparta or Rome" to "disaster or Rome" – and it is this skillful control over the structure of dilemmas, more than any direct weighing of one model against the other, that prods the reader to adopt the Roman conclusion, as if voluntarily.

Seemingly conscious that he has shifted the terms of the argument, Machiavelli concludes by resuming the original dilemma once more: "To return to the first reasoning, I believe that it is necessary to follow the Roman order and not that of the other republics – for I do not believe one can find a mode between the one and the other." But the clause after the dash is largely irrelevant: Machiavelli has just made his case not by showing that there is no middle term between Rome and "the other republics," but by showing that "the other republics" are themselves a middle term. Having discarded the binary choice between Rome and Sparta, Machiavelli returns to it as if he has already settled it; in the rapid shift from dilemma to trilemma back to dilemma, it is all too easy to agree with him. And on the adoption of the Roman model – on this masterful manipulation of choices and frames – rests many of the *Discourses*' crucial themes: the necessity of arming the people, the conflict of the orders, and all of the institutions that mediate that conflict. Given the radicalism of these conclusions, we should not be surprised that Machiavelli takes pains not to press the argument "by [his] importunity"; rather, he presents these conclusions as almost beyond his control, as mandated by the structure of the problem itself.

Again, we find a similar pattern of argumentation in miniature, with similar consequences, throughout Machiavelli's political works. It is a pattern that speaks the passionless language of choice while leaving moderation all but inconceivable: utter wickedness or utter goodness; benefits or destruction for conquered peoples; pardon or destruction for great offenders. But perhaps more striking are those Machiavellian dilemmas that appear, on reflection, to

lock the argument into a framework of either/or when both/and, or neither/nor, would seem to be just as plausible. For instance, consider the *Discourses*' statement about the causes of war cited above: that they can be classified either as limited wars brought about by ambition, or as wars of extermination brought about by mass migration. That formulation rules out the possibility of wars that fit neither category: limited, but arising for reasons other than ambition – reasons including the "structural" account of conflict that was as old as Thucydides. In other words, the statement turns out to be a consequential account of conflict as rooted in the "depravities" of human nature, and yet it is concealed beneath a choice. Once more, Machiavelli's long chapter on conspiracies opens with a flat statement that conspiracies are "made either against the fatherland or against a prince," and then goes on to examine each in turn (*Discourses*, 3.6). But taking that statement seriously implies that conspiracies against a prince are *not* directed against the fatherland – an especially subversive position for a writer who had himself been implicated in a conspiracy against a prince. Last, it seems that Machiavelli was so devoted to the strategic framing of choice that he turned to it even when writing comedy: the preface to his *Mandragola* "divides its hypothetical audience into two groups, one admired for its sophisticated wit and the other disdained for its narrow-mindedness, in an effort to make the spectators identify with the first group" – and to elide the possibility that one might have sophisticated taste and still dislike Machiavelli's play. In all of these cases, the framing of choice "forces the audience's thought into a narrow channel" (Rebhorn, 1988: 205, 215).

Like most instances of effective framing, these classifications blur the distinction between representations of the state of the world and statements that attempt to shape the world, or to bring off such shaping as a fait accompli. There is nothing controversial in Machiavelli's more innocuously "scholastic" classifications, such as "I say, therefore, that battles are lost or won" (*Art of War*, 4.73). But scattered liberally among these, and couched in the very same terms, are classifications that turn out to be explosive: "principalities are established or new." Nothing in the text marks the former as tautological and the latter as revolutionary: this is just why Machiavelli's advice functions as concealed power.

I have focused on Machiavelli's dilemmatic framing because it is such a pervasive and distinctive feature of his work. Of course, not all of Machiavelli's advice is structured in terms of dilemmas or disjunctions; but even so, we often find him using other means of framing, such as redescription, to argue more or less indirectly. Skinner (1996: 170–171) has shown how Machiavelli puts redescription to great use in his reconstruction of the princely virtues, dismissing traditional liberality as prodigality and traditional clemency as laxity, and turning the traditional vices of miserliness and cruelty into potential acts of selflessness. But these acts of redescription are especially surprising when we

read them alongside the school of thought on flattery that Machiavelli worked to overturn. For Plutarch, recall, the flattering counselor is evil precisely because he engages in redescription – calling prodigality "liberality," and so on – and diffuses a general haze of moral doubt. Not only is Machiavelli indifferent to this alleged evil, and not only does one of his key redescriptions happen to be the inverse of one of Plutarch's, but if we are to read *The Prince* as a model of advisory behavior, then redescription turns out to be one of the key duties of the good advisor. Just that quality that makes it disreputable for Plutarch's flatterer makes it especially valuable for Machiavelli's advisor: the less visible it is as a refutable moral argument, the more powerfully it acts.

Last, I would also call attention to a kind of "argument by implication," by which Machiavelli quietly bolsters some of his most shocking claims, including his position on human egoism. Even when he states his claims directly, I would ask whether their more effective formulations are instead those other passages in which he simply takes them for granted as frames for *other* arguments. For instance, Machiavelli is no sentimentalist when it comes to human motivations, famously insisting that we would sooner forget the murder of our fathers than the loss of our patrimonies (*Prince*, ch. 17). But a similar account of our motivations appears, with perfect understatement, where we would least expect it: in the *Discourses*' odd chapter on natural disasters. Here we read of periodic plagues, famines, and floods that wipe out humanity and its knowledge of the past. But "if among them someone is saved who has knowledge of it, to make a reputation and a name for himself he conceals it and perverts it in his mode so that what he has wished to write alone, and nothing else, remains for his successors" (*Discourses*, 2.5). Imagine the scene: humanity has been driven to near extinction, and from the wreckage emerges a haggard survivor whose very first item of business is to falsify history, lie to his children, and make a name for himself among the ruins. Machiavelli could not have painted a bleaker portrait of human nature and its all-consuming ambition, and rather than dwell on it, he shows how to drop it into the conversation in passing, as if to say, "of course this is how things are."[14]

Now, I suggested above that the practice of framing in the rhetorical tradition is linked to a kind of self-effacement; I also argued that the orator's aspiration to concealment is always subject to challenge. The Machiavellian advisor is not unique in sharing this aspiration – but he does stand apart in the degree to which he is able to realize it, and thus to safeguard his efforts at framing as classifications or descriptions rather than arguments. If the nature of the rhetorical situation – the fact that the orator *wants something* – is an inherent limit on the power of framing, the aim of the Machiavellian advisor is to deny that he is in a rhetorical situation at all with respect to the prince or the republic. Of course, we would not expect him to deny it with perfect success, nor should we imagine that Machiavelli sees rulers as dupes; a dupe prince would not re-

main a prince for long, let alone succeed in establishing a new principality. But Machiavelli does take to an extreme the orator's claim of total identification with the audience's interests – and to the extent this claim is believed, the advisor is able to function as an independent agent.

Machiavelli's model demonstrates the means by which such an advisor might, more than most orators, cast himself as lacking in passions and independent aims, and I will discuss some of those means in closing.

For one, Machiavelli describes the act of advising as quintessentially private, one in which a ruler gives only a handful "free rein to speak the truth *to him*" (*Prince,* ch. 23, emphasis added). Already, one of the orator's traditional motives – distinguishing himself before the public – is excised. Of course, speech before a private audience may still be a kind of oratory, and Machiavelli's chapter on advice in the *Discourses* does envision the possibility of conflict between advisors, of the kind that might prevent any one advisor's frames from going unchallenged. But more important than this curtailed rhetorical arena is the way in which Machiavelli generally demonstrates how to avoid the expectations of stereotypically rhetorical speech. His political works are running lessons in how to speak about politics with an "affected artlessness of style," which seems to mimic and embody base reality (Hariman, 1995: 18–24), and in the ways in which the traditional markers of rhetorical speech, such as the periodic Ciceronian sentence, might be avoided (McCanles, 1983: 13).

But even more important are the ways in which Machiavelli positions the counselor as an entirely subsidiary power, as an instrument in the hands of the ruler. His chapters on advising in *The Prince* ring this theme repeatedly. An advisor "must never think about himself, but always about his prince." "Good advice must arise from the prudence of the prince," not vice-versa (*Prince*, ch. 23). Good rulers have more powerful minds than good advisors (on this claim as a deliberate deception, see Rebhorn, 1988: 218). The prince is explicitly warned against *other* advisors who will "take the state away from him" (*Prince*, ch. 23). Taken at face value, all of these statements are reassurances; read performatively, though, they are models of how to reassure a prince. Above all, the reassurance runs: *my interests are identical with yours* (Ascoli, 1993: 248; Benner, 2013: 269; Kain, 1995: 41–42).[15] And given this construction of an advisory self without independent passions or interests, perceptive readers of Machiavelli have observed that the person of the advisor has a way of fading from his texts in the way that, say, the person of Cicero does not fade from his orations. As Philip J. Kain puts it, "the adviser is always there; it is just that you never notice him. He is like the photographer behind the camera." And his scientistic way of describing and classifying the world does not just gain persuasive power from this concealment, but actually reinforces it, in a cycle vicious or virtuous depending on where one sits: one way in which the advi-

sor remains "behind the camera" is by "counseling the prince to be scientific, by adopting a scientific attitude, by always focusing on the objective situation, by emphasizing external necessity. In this way, he draws the prince's attention away from himself, the adviser, the theorist" (Kain, 1995: 36, 47).

Machiavelli effaces himself as theorist and model advisor, and we might nominate this for the master-frame of both roles: "It seemed more suitable for me to search after the effectual truth of the matter rather than its imagined one" (*Prince*, ch. 15). The contrast is so bracing that we might not stop to ask what kind of unsuspected agency is concealed under the guise of scientific instrumentality, or which assumptions, priorities, and values are subsumed under the heading of truth.

## IV. Conclusion

There is value in reading Machiavelli's political works not in terms of *what* they advise, but in terms of *how* they advise. That reading has allowed us to trace a thread from his break with the "mirror" literature's conception of flattery; to his adoption of a notion of flattery more grounded in the tradition of classical rhetoric; to his appropriation and expansion of that tradition's techniques of concealing arguments beneath descriptions, classifications, and choices; and to his construction of the advisor as a remarkably self-effacing kind of orator. And I have argued that Machiavelli's strategies of framing and concealment are not incidental to his work, but lend critical support to some of his most distinctive and radical claims, including those on the purpose of political theorizing and the imperative of republican imperialism. I close by posing two further questions.

First, a good deal of Machiavelli's advice is not pressed indirectly or formulated dilemmatically – we have only to think, for instance, of the closing exhortation of *The Prince*. But if my account is so focused on Machiavelli's concealed arguments, what can it make of his direct ones? I would argue that the case is analogous to that of his tautological and explosive dilemmas: they are so intermixed that they are difficult to separate, and that very difficulty appears to be another strategy of concealment. There is so much concealment of the advisor's passions in Machiavelli that disclosures of those passions, or even unvarnished statements of opinion, ought to be greeted with a default skepticism. In other words, a full account of Machiavelli's notion of concealment must also include the possibility of disclosing oneself, on one's own terms, even in the most theatrical of ways. Cesare Borgia seeks to violently pacify the Romagna; he conceals himself behind Remirro de Orco, the lieutenant he commissions to undertake the bloody work. When the work is done, he

orders Remirro chopped in two and placed on public display; no one doubts that this is Borgia's doing. Borgia discloses himself as the man who has put a dramatic stop to the bloodletting, and "such a spectacle left those people satisfied and amazed" (*Prince*, ch. 7; see Kain, 1995: 46–47). Machiavelli conceals himself behind the mask of dispassion, and at the climactic moment of *The Prince*, with its dramatic cry to drive the barbarians from Italy, the counselor discloses himself. But Borgia's seeming disclosure is only another concealment: he hides his responsibility for Remirro's crimes through his very spectacle of openness. Might we say something similar of Machiavelli's own spectacle of openness? The listening prince, amazed and satisfied, may be content that the advisor has finally let the mask of dispassion drop – that the advisor has taken his true stand on a fixed and singular point, calibrating the rest of the book in retrospect. But we might be more doubtful that any disclosures in Machiavelli are so uncomplicated. Is the climactic statement of the advisor's identity analogous to "battles are lost or won," or to "principalities are established or new"?

Second, what does this reading mean for claims that Machiavelli is among the first scientists of politics? I have argued that just where Machiavelli appears to be at his most scientific, he is in fact at his most rhetorical. If Machiavelli indeed helped to pioneer the tropes of the scientific study of politics, it is worth remembering that these tropes did not originate as disinterested analyses of power, but as exercises of power. Of course, genealogy is not destiny, and this is no reason at all to conclude that the disinterested analysis of power is impossible. But Machiavelli's advisory model does raise the possibility that these tropes have their origin not in the Copernican revolution, but the Ciceronian oration. It demonstrates the potent ends toward which the ostensibly neutral activities of classifying, representing, and advising can be directed, and it reminds us that these are potential sites of power well worth our critical attention.

## Endnotes

1 The author would like to thank Philip Bobbitt, Robert S. Erikson, Philip Hamburger, David Johnston, Nadia Urbinati, and several anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this article.

2 I use "ruler" to refer to both princes and republican leaders, largely because Machiavelli himself makes little distinction between "those who counsel a republic and those who counsel a prince" (*Discourses* 3.35). On continuities between *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, see Kahn, 1994: 45; and Bobbitt, 2013: 6–8, 17–20.

3 For instance, he was reprimanded by superiors on at least nine occasions for insubordination regarding the timing and content of his dispatches. One 1502 rep-

rimand insisted that he "leave the judgment to others." While no evidence proves that these censures played a causal role in shaping Machiavelli's mature writings, they do show a secretary interested in pressing the boundaries of his office. See Najemy, 1990: 105–106.

4 On "the growing power of the corps of public officials" in early modern regimes, see Chabod, 1964: 32–37. On the growth of professional foreign services, see Bobbitt, 2002: 81, 89; Keir, 1938: 4. On Machiavelli's foreign service experience, see Black, 1990: 80; Ridolfi, 1963: 18; De Grazia, 1994: 18; Whitfield, 1947: 38. On the 15th- and 16th-century development of professional civil services, see Fischer and Lundgreen, 1975: 457, 480; Tilly, 1975: 34; Partner, 1990: 39; Finer, 1997: 973. On the emergence of professional advisors as a sociological class, defined by their prioritization of technical competence, see Weber, 2009: 82–83.

5 Machiavelli-as-scientist is an enduring strand in the secondary literature. See Hume, 1987: 13–29; Pollock, 1895: 42–49; Olschki, 1945; Cassirer, 1946: 154; Lerner, 1950: xxv–xlvi; Masters, 1998; Brown, 2009: 24. On the history of scientistic readings of Machiavelli, see also Mattingly, 1958: 482–491; Viroli, 1998: 1–2, 44–46; Walsh, 2007: 287–291; Plamenatz, 2012: 17–29.

6 Despite the suggestive passage in the *Discourses* (3.35) noting that an advisor will rise in standing if a ruler ignores his advice and then meets with failure, Machiavelli does stipulate that advisors will generally have goals beyond self-advancement: "if they do not counsel without hesitation the things that appear to them useful…they fail in their office" (*Prince*, ch. 23).

7 The instability and blind chance that rack governments of all kinds, but especially the innovative governments of new princes and new republics, are well-worn Machiavellian themes. What I want to emphasize is the epistemic aspect of these claims: that "base reality" is far from obvious to any ruler. See Pocock, 1975: viii; McCormick, 1993: 898; Breiner, 2008: 67. But why, for Machiavelli, is it important that a ruler's judgments be contested? It is certainly true that Machiavelli expects certain quintessential prophets and founders to do their political work "alone"; yet we see in his works, as I have stressed, a strong emphasis on the errors of judgment that shadow even the most effective rulers outside of these exalted few. If the lust for gain is an important spur to errors of judgment, then we might expect less clouded judgment from subordinates less exposed to the temptations of conquest's rewards.

8 Cicero, *De inventione*, 63.26; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 1.11.3; Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 22.1.

9 Even some professed critics of rhetoric have used a similar device: consider Socrates's insistent use of a dilemma in the *Protagoras*, at 333a.

10 Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae*, 4.3, and passim; Quintilian, *Institutio*, 4.2.96, 11.1.58–9, 12.9.17.

11 While I note an instance below in which a shift from dilemma to trilemma plays an important role in the *Discourses*, generally I do not claim that the number of choices Machiavelli offers his reader is especially important; what is significant is the way in which the offer of choices can be deceptively exhaustive.

12 Other instances of disjunctive statements occur at 1.5 (the people or the great as the guard of liberty), II.4 (two modes of the expansion of political leagues), 2.12

(armed or unarmed countries), 2.32 (two outcomes of a conspiracy to seize a town), 3.1 (renewal of republics by accident or prudence), and 3.19 (the ruled are either the ruler's partners or subjects).

13 Further, through a seemingly neutral sorting of types of dominions, Machiavelli has "cunningly organised the discussion in such a way as to highlight one particular type of case": rulers newly brought to power by others' arms, which happens to describe the Medici. See Skinner, 1981: 24.

14 Similarly, the *Discourses* launch several "amazingly bold criticisms of Christianity" (Mansfield and Tarcov, 1998: xxxiii). Yet their path is considerably smoothed by less obviously outrageous passages that take a subversive claim – that religion is to be considered in light of its political usefulness – as a mere background condition. For instance, we read that "destroyers of religions" are as detestable as "squanderers of kingdoms and republics" (whereas destroyers of false religions ought presumably to be praiseworthy), that Roman religion "made easier whatever enterprise the Senate or the great men of Rome might plan," and that Roman augury promoted Roman *virtù* even when false (1.15, 1.10, 1.11, 3.33). None of these passages mention Christianity, but their unspoken shift in criterion, from truth to efficacy, help to make Machiavelli's amazingly bold treatment of Christianity conceivable.

15 To treat this claim skeptically is not to suggest that the Machiavellian advisor is necessary self-seeking; as Kain suggests, he may place the welfare of the state above the ruler's interests and his own.

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