



# WHAT IS POLITICS?

The Virtuous Citizen

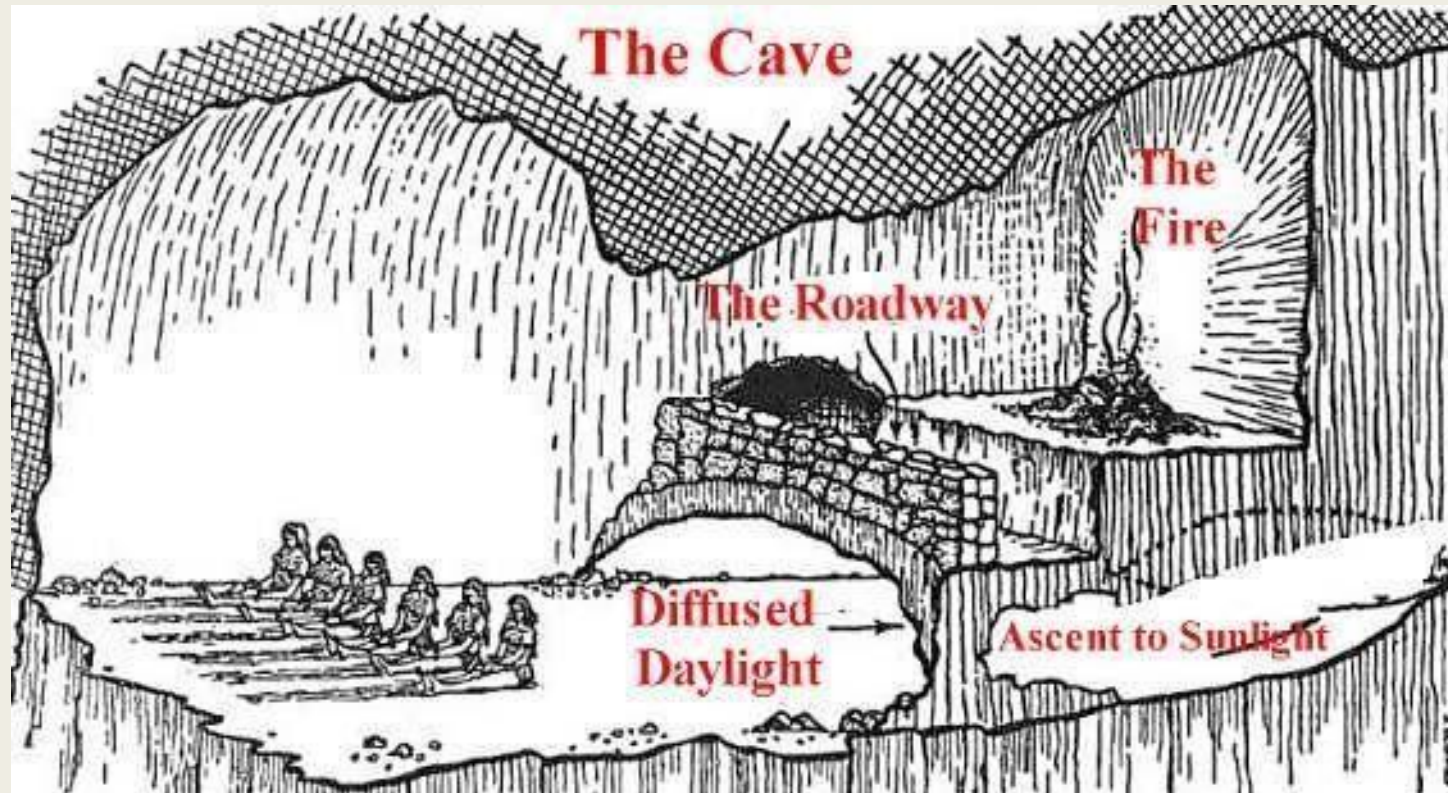


# Recap

- How do we think about these texts? What do we do with the tradition?
- Introduction to the themes: what is politics, freedom, justice, civil disobedience, revolution
- Plato: Politics as guardianship; politics is about identifying **experts**, not self-proclaimed elites and manipulators but philosophers who have genuine access to the true and beautiful
- **Plato's two metaphors illuminates this point:**
  - *Ship of State:*
    - Only a properly trained pilot can navigate the ship of state (the stargazer, the navigator)
    - Democratic processes get in the way of identifying competencies in politics; people are easily manipulated by things like good looks, pleasing speech; each person will have their own conception of the good.
    - Unlike Isaiah Berlin who says Political Philosophy is only possible in a world where ends collide, Plato thinks that there are objective and knowable ends, and that Philosophers can help us
  - *Problem:*
    - Philosophers do not look competent. The pilot of the ship was large and imposing but deaf and nearly blind. Why should we trust philosophers?

# Metaphor 2: The Cave

- Why do philosophers seem like bad candidates to rule even though they are the most qualified?
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQfRdl3GTw4>



# Plato's Conclusions

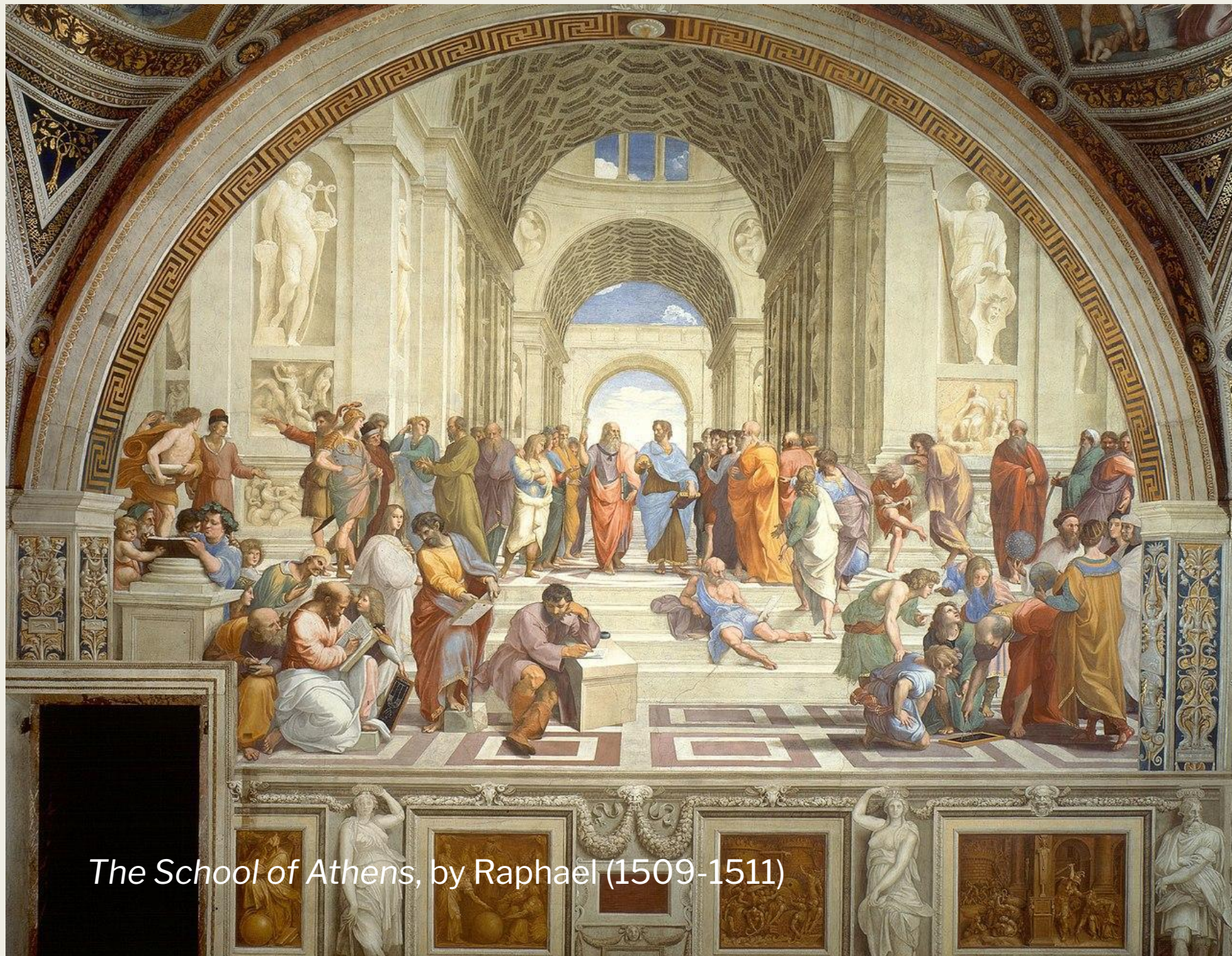
- Without philosophical expertise – i.e. the wisdom of those who have exited the cave and know the truth about the ‘real’ world – political leaders living in the cave can only orient themselves according to the shadows on the wall (impressions, half-truths, deceptions).
- Philosophers appear like bad candidates to rule because once they enter the realm of ideas, they appear to be in pain, to stumble. They only seem incompetent by virtue of reentering the messy reality of the cave. As such the prisoners might be inclined to kill the philosopher who tries to liberate them.
- Nevertheless, only the philosopher can expose the public to the truth and the real. That is why they should be selected to lead; otherwise they will continue to fumble in the dark.

# Politics as Conspiracy?

- **Practical meaning of Plato's Ideas:** Conspiracy of the philosophers against the Polis?
  - *Philosophers are a threat to society – they raise uncomfortable questions (Socrates was sentenced to death for supposedly corrupting the young of Athens)*
  - *If you believe that a life of contemplation is ideal, and that philosophic truth should be entertained no matter how uncomfortable...this has some implication as to how political affairs are conducted*
  - *The only way philosophers can ensure that they can continue pursue philosophical truth is to engage in the affairs of politics*
- **The 'Noble Lie'**
  - *Goal of politics is to preserve life of contemplation: to which some may be initiated, but not all*
  - *Philosophers concocted the fiction of an afterlife – eternal rewards and punishments to incentivize the public to be good*

# Contemporary Retelling Plato's Cave Analogy Herbert Marcuse

- The conditions of the cave represent the material conditions that structure every aspect of our lives, the techno-rational state.
- When the philosopher tries to set the cave-dwellers free, he tells them "Put down your phones and come with me." The cave-dweller says, "If you take my phone, I will kill you. Plus, we need our phones to organize and to coordinate our revolutionary efforts." The philosopher says in response, "But your phone presumes a set of material conditions (extraction, production, shipping, advertisement, infrastructure, billing, administration, waste-management, etc. etc.), and furthermore it is also predicated on the investment of the capitalist state to continue its perpetual war economy (almost all of its component parts were designed and developed for the military). These conditions are the conditions of the cave. They exude a system of rationality and control. We can't bring the phone with us. It has no revolutionary potential."
- Within the cave we assume the empirical reality, rationality of those conditions;
- The phone serves a therapeutic function: heightened sense of entertainment; ease of communication; ease of consumption; ease of access to information; but it is actually a constraint, a prison since it reinforces the irrationality of our system (nuclear war, climate change)
- While the phone changes the material conditions in terms of the concrete reality of technology of the cave; it is not transformative, it is constitutive of the cave itself



*The School of Athens, by Raphael (1509-1511)*

# Divergent Schools of Thought

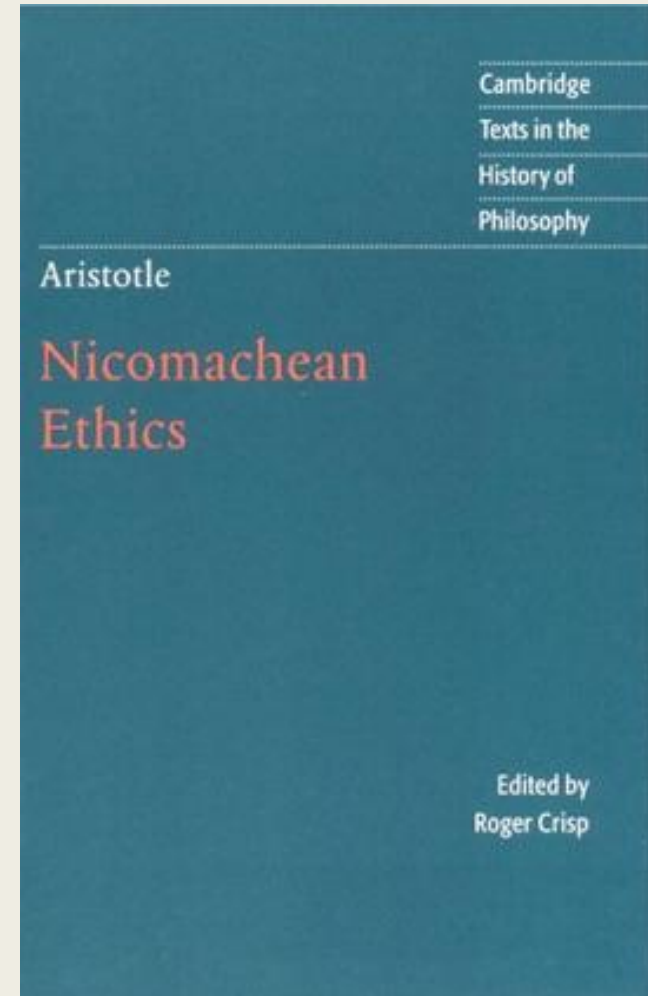
- Plato points to the heavens (old, shabby robes, book vertical, no sandals; face half shadowed).
  - Our philosophical orientation should be to things that are eternal, the True and the Beautiful (transcendent truths)
  - Politics is a conspiracy of the philosophers against the polis; they are the most capable to properly orient and direct political society
- Aristotle points to the earth (young, gold-trimmed robes, slightly in advance of Plato, book horizontal, with sandals)
  - Our focus should be on action that takes place here on earth.
  - Politics is different than contemplation; there are different considerations to politics than the True and the Eternal. (practical wisdom)





# Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

- Aristotle was, he was born in Stagira, present day Greece (grave just discovered) in 384 BC, 15 years after trial of Socrates.
- When he was 17 he was sent by his father to Athens to study at the Academy, established by Plato, where he studied for 20 years, until the death of Plato.
- After the death of Plato, Aristotle left Athens and went back to Macedonia, where he established a school--the Lyceum (which is what the French lyceum is named in honor of). He taught his most famous pupil, Alexander the Great.
- *Nicomachean Ethics* is about more than just ethical action – it is an attempt to make sense of human motivation. **Why do people do what they do? How should we organize our lives?**
- As we will see, politics is the highest art.



# Why do humans do anything?

- **Aristotle: Every action is aimed at some perceived good**
  - *You took this class to fulfill a course requirement, to graduate from college, to get a job, to buy a house, to have a family, to have a fulfilled life...*
  - *Even a bank robber robs a bank because he believes the wealth attained is some kind of good*
- **What is the Highest Good?** What is the best thing to pursue? In fact, most people characterize the highest good in 3 ways:
  - *Material wealth*
  - *Honor (to be famous, well respected, loved by your family)*
  - *Satisfaction of physical needs/desires, hedonism, the hedonic principle [in fact, most people equate happiness with physical pleasure]*
- **The problem:** all of these goods are deficient in different ways
  - *Material wealth – is not an end in itself but a means to another end; we want wealth for what it allows us to do*
  - *Honor – is contingent on other people's perceptions of you; we might be worthy of honor but not honored due to deficiencies of those around us*
  - *Satisfaction of physical needs – not peculiar to humans (even animals do this)*
- **For something to be the highest good, it needs to be an end in itself that is peculiar to humans**
- **The highest good must engage the highest faculties peculiar to humans = REASON, and it must be an end in itself.**

# Agreement/Disagreement with Plato

- Since we are endowed with Reason, the **highest good** will in some sense consist in engaging INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES
  - Life of contemplation, much like Plato's philosopher kings [Plato stops here]
- But for Aristotle this cannot be all there is to human good...
  - Aristotle argues that **how we live our lives** (our character) is a significant part of attaining the highest good
  - **Intellectual Reasoning without Moral Reasoning is deficient.**
  - Aristotle proposes the Virtues of Character, or Excellence, the cultivation of practical wisdom
- What are VIRTUES of CHARACTER?
  - To begin to answer this, answer this question: **“What is the function of a flute player?”**
    - Not mere competency but mastery – to play the flute to best of his/her ability. To be able to produce something creative that others cannot expect
  - **In the same manner we might ask: “What is the function of a human?”**
    - Virtue of character IS self-mastery, being the best human you can be
- The telos [end] of humans?
  - **A seed's purpose is to grow into a strong and healthy tree. A mature tree is the telos of a seed.**
  - **A human's purpose is to grow into a virtuous person; unlike a tree we participate in obtainment with those ends**

# What is Self-Mastery: The Golden Mean

- Aristotle observes that most desirable character traits are situated between two extremes:
  - Cowardliness □ *Bravery* □ Rashness
  - Boorish □ *Witty* □ Buffoonish
  - Self-abnegation □ *Self-respect* □ Pride/Vanity
  - Acetic □ *Temperance* □ Indulgent
  - Servile □ *Friendly* □ Quarrelsome
  - Slothful □ *Diligent* □ Works to excess
- Self-mastery is a process of “finding the mean” the appropriate expression at any given moment, in any given role you inhabit (in family, community, country)
- At every time and place, there is a virtuous expression that is possible.

# Spectrum of Mastery and Habituation

- Vicious – chooses to be wicked, desires to be wicked
- Incontinent – desires to be good, but acts wrongly out of weakness (frustrated with himself because he knew what was right but didn't do it)
- Continent – acts rightly, but only against a strong desire to do what is wrong (frustrated in the sense that he wasn't able to satisfy his desires)
- Virtuous -- chooses to be good, desires to be good – **Habituated to excellence**
- **Example: You see a person drop their wallet on the ground; How does each act?**

# What does this have to do with Politics?

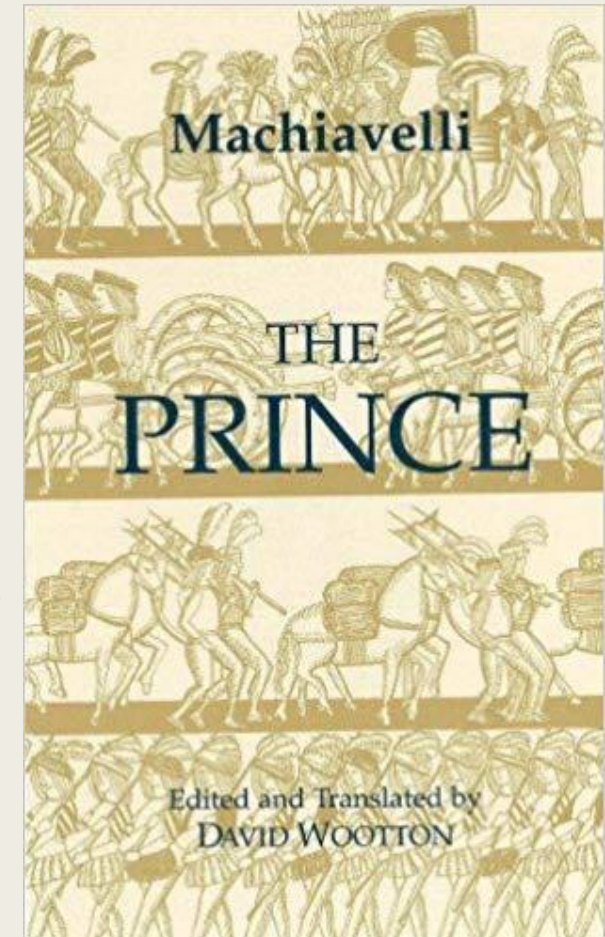
- **Politics is about cultivating excellence/virtue.**
  - *Politics (the public realm) is a forum for excellence; it is a forum to practice and demonstrate virtue.*
- **The more virtuous (the less corrupt) a body politic is, the happier and healthier its “constitution” will be.**
- **For Aristotle:**
  - *Unlike Plato, it's not merely the philosophers who should rule (those who have mastered contemplation)*
  - *People should select Virtuous People to be their leaders*
  - *Virtuous leaders will pass laws that encourage and enhance the public's virtue (sumptuary laws)*
- **Your degree of virtue is highly correlated to the kind of state you are born into.**
  - *Corrupt leaders will produce corrupt citizens*

# Aristotle's Conclusions about Politics

- Aristotle agrees with Plato that it is essential to choose effective guardians to rule; for the health of a community, the public must choose virtuous leaders; corrupt leaders produce a corrupt public
- But he disagrees with the view that politics is a conspiracy of philosophers against the public for a life of contemplations
- Politics is best thought of as the place where we perform our virtue; it is the public realm;
- Good leaders will pass good laws that enhance public virtue

# Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

- Lived the early part of his life under the Medici-ruled Florence (a family that ruled Florence for ~ 60 years)
- The expulsion of the Medicis in 1492 led to a dramatic upheaval in Florentine politics
  - *Witness to revolutionary republican movement of Friar Savonarola*
  - *Witness to the fall of Savonarola and the formation of a republican government*
  - *In this period he held various government positions: an official secretary of government documents; head of Florentine militia; a diplomat to Rome (a diplomat to the court of Cesare Borgia); he was a man deeply embedded in Republican Florentine politics.*
- In 1512 the Medicis (backed by Rome) retook Florence; Machiavelli was accused of conspiring against the Medici family and was imprisoned, tortured, and then exiled.
  - *Wrote *The Prince* in 1513 to get back into the good graces of the Medicis (wasn't published until after his death in 1532)*





# Machiavellian virtue – a teacher of evil?

- “My hope is to write a book that will be useful, at least to those who read it intelligently, and so I thought it sensible to go straight to a discussion of how things are in real life and not waste time with a discussion of an imaginary world. For many authors have constructed imaginary republics and principalities that have never existed in practice and never could; for the gap between how people actually behave and how they ought to behave is so great that anyone who ignores everyday reality in order to live up to an ideal will soon discover he has been taught how to destroy himself, not how to preserve himself. For anyone who wants to act the part of a good man in all circumstances will bring about his own ruin, for those he has to deal with will not all be good. So it is necessary for a ruler, if he wants to hold on to power, to learn how not to be good, and to know when it is and when it is not necessary to use this knowledge.” (*Prince*, 48)

# Example: Friar Savonarola (*Prince, Chapter 6*)

- The History:
  - *After the defeat of the Medicis, Savonarola dominated Florentine politics from 1494 until 1498 (so Machiavelli knew him; attended his sermons)*
  - *Radical proto-republican (though theocratic); tried to create the city of god on earth... Florence would be “the New Jerusalem” (purity campaign to enforce virtue)*
  - *Limitations: as a friar he was not allowed to hold office, but a radical party did form around him which enacted his policy proposals (Slightly more sympathetic reading in Discourses)*
  - *His party proposed a new constitution which enfranchised the artisan class, granted every citizen in good standing the right to a vote in a new parliament (important republican reforms)*
  - *He defied the Pope by continuing in a failed alliance with France, and ultimately his power was challenged; he was executed as a heretic*

# The execution of Savonarola (1498)



# Machiavelli's assessment

- “One ought to pause and consider the fact that there is nothing harder to undertake, nothing more likely of failure, nothing more risky to pull off, than to set oneself up as a leader who plans to found a new system of government.” (*Prince*, 19)
- “For men do not truly believe in new things until they have had practical experience of them.” (*Prince*, 20).
  - *This is why Utopias are unlikely: Good government and moral goods are experiential and practical; they are not rational-deliberative; you cannot simply ‘convince’ people to do something because it is good or moral*
- Machiavelli characterizes Savonarola not only as working against fortune, but as incompetent, ill-prepared, and “unarmed”
  - *“So you have to be prepared for the moment when they [the public] no longer believe: Then you have to **force them to believe**. Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus would not have been able to make their peoples obey their new structures of authority for long if they had been unarmed. This is what happened, in our own day, to Friar Savonarola. **He and his new constitution were destroyed as soon as the multitude began to stop believing in him.** He had no way of stiffening the resolution of those who had been believers or of forcing disbelievers to obey.”* (*Prince*, 20)

# Machiavellian Virtue

- Paradox: **Virtue<sub>1</sub>** (e.g. Aristotelian or Christian virtue) is created or made possible by what looks like *immorality and vice*, **Virtue<sub>2</sub>** (which are the necessary structures of coercion and authority)
  - *Example: “Moses was obliged, in order to have his laws accepted and his proposals adopted, to murder vast numbers of men, men who opposed his plans for no other reason but envy.” (Discourses, 207)*
  - *The moral law of “thou shall not kill” requires an antecedent law of “thou shall kill”*

# *Virtue*<sub>2</sub>: Princely Virtue

- In contrast to Aristotle's approach, who argued that virtue is grounded in a law of nature (the golden mean). The proliferation of virtue within society naturally leads to the common good (Happiness); virtuous leaders direct others to increased virtue
- Machiavelli's approach: Since history shows that **Virtue**<sub>1</sub> is impossible to maintain on its own [e.g. Savonarola]; we need an alternative conception of princely virtue (**Virtue**<sub>2</sub>). **Virtue**<sub>2</sub> is that which is needed to create a space for the existence of **Virtue**<sub>1</sub>.
  - *The problem of dirty hands... a prince cannot always be good because other princes are not good*
  - *What is more, Virtue 1 is a product of the Prince's ability to constitute a political space (legal positivism) – morality is derived from the laws a prince establishes*

# Machiavellian Politics is Princely Virtue

- Princes need to face everyday reality and “learn to not be good” – they must be willing to commit acts of violence and cruelty in order to effectively establish a space of private morality
  - *To know when cruelty, violence, and deception are necessary*
  - *A virtuous prince will not be a sadist, but someone who is ‘good’ – he must learn to not be good*
  - *Be willing and able to preserve power*
  - *Has a proper orientation – the public good, the constitutions of a public morality, not private obsessions and desires (being capable at maintaining power is not enough) – good armies and good laws*
- There are lessons and rules to political organization. Since humans are fickle and corrupt, they need to be effectively managed. The only way to make the public virtuous is to be strategic; kill enemies, break promises, engage in conspiracies not merely to maintain power but to ensure a moral public

# Two types of virtue-based politics

## ■ Aristotle argues that politics is about virtue:

- *Virtuous leaders pass good laws that will make the public more virtuous*
- *Politics is the highest art because it concerns public happiness*
- *Ideal theory – there are objective benchmarks of virtue*

## ■ Machiavelli also argues that politics is about virtue:

- *Non-ideal theory -- conventionally virtuous leaders are vulnerable because they must live in a world of non-virtuous neighbors*
- *Princes must live by another kind of virtue, one that ensures the protection of the city from foreign threats and one that ensures the public's moral well-being*
- *Politics is about good armies (external defense) and good laws (private virtue)*



# Questions to consider

- Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli agree that political leadership is a skill (like in architecture or medicine) that can be learned? That there is an objective criteria for a good leader (though they disagree about what those criteria are!)  
Do you
- Do you agree with Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli that the democratic process is overrated?
- What role do you think virtue plays in politics? Both Aristotle and Machiavelli agree that good laws make the public more virtuous. Do you think that this is a good way of thinking about politics?