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Three Humanists Walk into a Bar:

A Conversation with Michel de Montaigne, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Thomas More

This paper is written as a dialogue between Michel de Montaigne, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Thomas More. The setting is a podcast hosted by Montaigne with Machiavelli and More as guests.

Michel de Montaigne: Hello! And welcome back to *What Do I Know? (Que sais-je?)* A podcast where we encourage you to look inside yourself and doubt, question, and reflect. I'm your host, Michel de Montaigne, and today's topic is Renaissance humanism. What was humanism in the Renaissance? What's the difference between civic and Christian humanism? And how can we apply some of these principles to today? Joining me to discuss this are two of my old buddies, Sir Thomas More and Niccolo Machiavelli. Thank you both for being here.

Thomas More: Great to be here, Michel! I'm honored. I'm usually overlooked in favor of my bestie, Erasmus.

Montaigne: Well, we did reach out to Erasmus. But he's on a book tour.

More: [through gritted teeth] Oh. I see.

Machiavelli: Yes. Thanks for having me. I'm hoping to make some positive associations with my name for once.

Montaigne: First, let's start with a brief overview of Renaissance humanism. There are different types of humanism, which we'll cover, but, crucially, Renaissance humanism centers on the person. According to Renaissance historian Ada Palmer, "If you can seriously discuss what Renaissance humanism means for half an hour, you can have an MA in Renaissance history" (min. 22:32:57). So let's see if we can hand out a few MAs today!

Humanism in the Renaissance wasn't thought of as a philosophy with one unifying principle. Rather, it was a cultural movement characterized by a revival of classical texts and ideologies (Carneades 2021a). Geoff Baldwin, in his article "Individual and Self in the Late Renaissance" contextualizes Renaissance humanism, saying:

Humanism could be thought of as that part of the Renaissance which emphasized the rhetorical and ethical achievements of ancient texts. It answered the need for a language to express clearly ideas about public life that grew from the combination of an increasing social and political complexity and older practices and institutions (Baldwin p. 346).

The Renaissance, as Ada Palmer says in her book *Inventing the Renaissance*, asks the question, "What can we know about the human world, social dynamics, and how to make them better?" (Palmer min. 25:57:42). So, Nicky, tell us about your brand of humanism?

Machiavelli: I advocate civic humanism where virtue is individualistic, and politics is separate from ethics. People should be moral not as a duty to the church or themselves but to benefit the community as a whole. People should have a say in government but value preserving the state over their own personal gain (Carneades 2021b). By separating ethics from the church,

one is able to think of things more empirically and focus on how things *are* (verita effettuale “effectual truth”) rather than how things *ought* to be. The individual, therefore, has more freedom to become an active citizen because I’ve stripped away the moral scaffolding (Cook 2026).

Montaigne: So you think that when people are unencumbered by, as you say, “the moral scaffolding” of ethics in service to God, they will then engage in ethics in service to the state?

Machiavelli: That’s the idea.

More: Can I jump in here? Nick, in *The Prince*, you say men are, and I quote, “ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous” (Machiavelli 329). With attributes like that, why would they do anything for the common good?

Machiavelli: Okay, that’s a bit out of context. In that passage, I’m explaining that it’s better to be both loved and feared but that it’s difficult to be both. But, because men are generally fickle and false, it’s better to be feared than loved (Machiavelli 329). As I say in chapter 17:

... for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves by a dread of punishment which never fails. Nevertheless a prince ought to inspire fear in such a way that, if he does not win love, he avoids hatred;” (Machiavelli 331).

So the answer to your question is fear. Men act out of fear either from punishment by the state or divine punishment from God. A wise ruler uses the right amount of coercion, control, and external punishments. However a good ruler can also help foster a sense of security within the polis. Over time, they can build up enough goodwill and thus create *internalized* motivators for the people where fear becomes a sort of “faded subconscious background” (Cook 2026).

Montaigne: So religion is instrumental for you?

Machiavelli: Yes.

Montaigne: Explain to our listeners why fear is a humanist idea, or is it?

Machiavelli: Well, sort of. I explain in Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, Of Those Things for Which Men, Especially Princes, Are Praised or Blamed, that I'm breaking with my predecessors and contemporaries in the Christian humanist tradition, which urges mercy, piety, and honesty (Machiavelli, chap.15). These are nice ideas, but they're not rooted in reality. A "rainbows-and-sunshine, pie-in-the-sky" world is naïve. I look to classical antiquity for guidance on how to instill the proper kind of fear in people and put humans in the driver's seat. A fear-based ruler can shape destiny instead of leaving destiny to fate.

More: Pffttt! [blows raspberries] Poppycock! Nice rhetoric, but you're simply justifying bad behavior. It's like saying, "You made me hit you because you wouldn't be quiet."

Machiavelli: Hold on now. I'm not the first to advocate these ideas. I'm borrowing heavily from the Romans. But unlike Cicero, who hid it under "sacrificial rhetoric," I'm upfront about my advice (Zerba 215). Michelle Zerba, in her article "The Frauds of Humanism: Cicero, Machiavelli, and the Rhetoric of Imposture," says:

Deception, to put it simply, is an acknowledged and vital element in civic humanism long before *The Prince*. The difference is that Cicero typically couches it in a sacrificial rhetoric that is euphemistically inflected while Machiavelli opts for a hard-edged rhetoric of administrative efficiency to make his case (215).

More: You know what else the Romans revered? Glory, honor, fame, private property—all things that detract from one's happiness. Eric Nelson, in "Utopia through Italian Eyes: Thomas More and the Critics of Civic Humanism," discusses what my bro, Erasmus, saw as the two major pathologies Europe inherited from the Roman Empire: "the love of glory and the love of wealth" (1038). Nelson further expands on Erasmus, stating, "In short, because of Roman *gloria* we have lost *eudaimonia*, and because of Roman *ius* we have lost justice" (1038). Nelson continues, "The goal of Utopian life is not glory, which the Utopians disdain, but rather 'happiness' (*Felicitas*) – life is organized so that "as far as public needs permit, all citizens should be free to devote themselves to the freedom and culture of the mind. For in that, they think, lies the happiness of life'" (1040).

Machiavelli: Oh, sweet Moses! I'm not against happiness! I just don't think it's as important as other virtues like glory and honor. One can derive their *purpose* through glory and honor. To be happy, people need a purpose. But I don't think happiness (a pleasant emotional state) or *eudaimonia* (a well-lived life through reason and virtue) is the goal. And if I did, Christian happiness, which is otherworldly and oriented toward salvation, would not be the answer. I cannot reconcile goals that contradict reality (Lipscomb "Sir Thomas Moore").

A more accurate measure for me would be *virtu*. What do I mean by *virtu*? Many things, such as strength, valor, character, bravery, skill, shrewdness, etc. But the term I like best is ingenuity. Regardless, *virtu* is judged by *results*. *Virtu*'s direct antagonist is *fortuna* (fortune/chance), which is a temporary state often in flux. A ruler must employ *necessita* and know when and how to use *virtu* and harness *fortuna* to maintain the stability of the state and bring about the greater good (Harrison).

Tom, you also don't believe either happiness or eudaimonia is the goal of life. The Utopians in your book do, but for you it's a sort of "grace-perfected beatitude of salvation." Besides, how happy are you going to be while you sit in your healing circle, holding hands, singing kumbaya, channeling your spirit animal, when you get pummeled by a violent, power-hungry faction looking to exploit your commitment to peace?!

Montaigne: Okay, friends. This might be a good time to pause and recenter ourselves. Let's take a few deep, cleansing breaths together. Ready. Inhale through your nose for two three four. Hold for two three four. And exhale through your mouth for two three four. Now, repeat.

[More sighs and rolls his eyes.]

Machiavelli [mutters quietly]. What did I get myself into?

Montaigne: Everyone feel more relaxed? Great! Let's move on. Thomas, how does your book *Utopia* relate to Christian humanism?

More: I'm sure your listeners are familiar with my soon-to-be—fingers-crossed-this-is-my-year—New York Times bestseller *Utopia*. Utopia is a fictional place where there is no money, gold, or private property. Education is universal, and while all religions are tolerated, there is no official religion; Utopians are pagans, not Christians. Labor is mandatory but only required for six hours per day, and all goods are held in common and distributed based on need, etc. (Lipscomb "Sir Thomas More").

One way *Utopia* exemplifies Christian humanism is its emphasis on education. As Crystal Bartolovich so elegantly states in her article, "Utopia and Its New Enemies: Intellectuals, Elitism, and the Commonwealth of Learning," "*Everyone* in More's Utopia is learned; everyone,

in fact, receives an *identical* education—as well as, crucially, equal access from birth to quality food, housing, clothing, and all other resources” (38). This is true! Bartolovich further discusses just how revolutionary an idea this was because, unlike Plato’s *Republic*, it undergirds a “universalized set of material conditions of existence” that helps form the basis of not only equal access to education but also equal access to things like nutrition, housing, and the “*leisure* to pursue the life of the mind” (50).

I included a rather stealthy Christian humanist ideal in *Utopia*—reason. I designed *Utopia* as a place with no sin, and, therefore, no grace or redemption. The most important sin to guard against in *Utopia* is pride. With no autonomy, agency, or free will, there’s no possibility of salvation. I set up *Utopia* this way to see if a world, unaided by revelation, could arrive at the same moral truths as Christians. Utopians are pagans, yet they found a just, organized, and more-or-less virtuous society through reason alone. Using reason as the basis for justice is a humanist ideal (Lipscomb “Sir Thomas More”).

Additionally, I saw how violent and property-obsessed the Protestant Reformation was and asked, “What would society look like if it actually followed the precepts of classical philosophy and Christian teachings?” I thought, let’s not look at how things are, but rather look at what *ought* to be. This is how *Utopia* fits Christian humanist ideas.

Machiavelli: Hang on, Tommy boy. You forgot a few of the more unsavory tenets of your “idealized” society. There’s slavery, the extreme land grabs and colonization, the oppression of women, and the fact that people can’t travel without permission. From *Utopia*, Of The Travelling of Utopians, “... but if any man goes out of the city to which he belongs without leave, and is

found rambling without a passport, he is severely treated, he is punished as a fugitive and sent home disgracefully” (More 267). How are ideas like these humanist principles?

More: Well... [More shrugs]

Montaigne: Don’t shrug, Tom. Nick makes a valid point. Which leads me to ask the eternal question: Did you mean *Utopia* as a satire or a blueprint?

More: Ugh! This again! Okay, look, it’s both. Obviously, *some* ideas are meant to satirize the times. The book is, in part, a critique of Christian humanist ideals and a support of “traditional humanism” (Nelson 1034). But do you believe, in my ideal world, I would include *no* Christianity, grace, or salvation from God?

Montaigne: So it’s up to the reader to decide which ideas to keep and which to toss out?

More: Uh... Yeah, kind of.

Montaigne: Let’s go back a bit. Tom, you said you intentionally made *Utopia* a place where the people arrive at a virtuous society by reason alone. If this is the case, then why do you need Christianity at all?

More: Because while reason can give you a just society, it cannot give you salvation or the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Christianity doesn’t replace reason; it *elevates* it (Lipscomb “Sir Thomas More”).

Machiavelli: Can we return to my question from before the “breathing break?” How does this ideology – and the fantasy world you’ve constructed – help people who face real-world threats?

More: It helps one achieve eternal salvation. Is there a greater threat than eternal damnation?

Machiavelli: So you're not as concerned with the suffering of life on earth as you are about getting souls into heaven? "Sorry, kids, I know this is torture, but don't worry, you might get into heaven!"

More: That's ridiculous! Of course I care about human suffering!

Montaigne: Have you guys tried journaling? It's a great way to process your emotions. You--

Machiavelli: Oh, Michel! Put some clothes on and go outside! The world is burning; dictators are afoot. There's no time to "journal" or live by idealized virtues! Consequences don't care about your feelings! If you don't separate ethics from politics, we'll all burn! Speaking of burning. You're a hypocrite, Tom. You gleefully advocated burning heretics alive. I'm pretty sure that constitutes human suffering!!

More: I stand by that. I was trying to save people's souls by showing others what *will* happen if they don't repent. In fact, I also advocated burning dangerous books that threatened the unity of the Commonwealth. Because while I gave authority to the people in *Utopia*, this can be lost by the vulgar, prideful, and self-interested minds who are easily swayed the wrong way (Paul 360-361). Better to burn on earth than burn for eternity.

Machiavelli: That answer provided the kindling for the Protestant Reformation. Because of your stubborn insistence on gluing life to virtue, or a higher purpose, you suffocated the joy out of it. People just wanted a little breathing room. And that's why, 500 years later, my name is eponymous and barely anyone remembers yours. You weren't even this podcast's first choice.

Montaigne: Not helpful, my man. Not helpful.

More: Yeah. And what do people remember you for? All the wrong things. Cruelty! Manipulation! Deception! Ruthlessness!

Machiavelli: Hey! It's not my fault that people have been misreading my book for centuries. *The Prince* was not meant for everyone to read. The printing press was not my friend. Gutenberg, I hope you're roasting in hell! People need to read my work more closely, consider context, and not rely on tech-bros, billionaires, and tyrants to misuse my principles.

Montaigne: Okay. We should probably wrap up before someone loses their head.

More: Uh, *hell-oo*!

Montaigne: Oops. Sorry, Tom, my bad. Before you give me your final thoughts, here are a few of my own. As I listened to you guys "debate" humanism, a question kept eddying around in my head: what does it mean to be human? I don't think there's one single way "to do" humanism. I think there's a *diversity* of ways to be human. Then again, I also think there *is* a universal way to be human. Each of us holds the entirety of the human cosmos within us (Lipscomb "Montaigne"). This is why, as Sarah Bakewell says about me in her excellent book, *Humanly Possible: Seven Hundred Years of Humanist Freethinking, Inquiry, and Hope*, "We can recognize ourselves in the experiences or character of others however much we diverge from them in cultural attitudes and background" (Bakewell min 6:07). Pretty incisive, eh?

My writings were revolutionary in that they were at once philosophical yet personal and without dogma. This is why I'm a humanist! Bakewell, quoting me, says, "I set forth notions that a human and my own simply as human notions considered in themselves." (Bakewell min. 6:08:57). I pioneered the essay and stream-of-consciousness writing style as a way for

individuals to see themselves as the subject. Throw off your shackles! Live in the moment! Uncover the naked transparency of the body and soul alike! Then again, I encourage people to doubt and question what they know about themselves.

I love solitude and introspection. Then again, I think friendship and having an intimate bond with another is the essence of life. Friendship, as opposed to marriage, is free and voluntary (Montaigne 1,259). As I say in *Essays*, Of Friendship, "... whereas friendship has no manner of business or traffic with aught but itself" (Montaigne 1,258). Humanism not only centers the self, but also centers the self *in relation* to others. Humans are in a state of constant flux with our environment, others, and ourselves.

Machiavelli: Michel, you're rambling again. And what's your point?

Montaigne: I don't know. Anywho, each of you, please sum up your version of humanism in one to two sentences. Then briefly say how people should incorporate your ideas into their lives? Tom, we'll start with you.

More: For me, Christian humanism centers around the revival of classical texts used for the cultivation of a Christian mind. The goal is to reform the individual conscious and orient society toward salvation. Remember, kids, the ends do not justify the means, and there are no shortcuts to salvation. You must, as you say, "do the work."

Machiavelli: Civic humanism is a utilitarian ethos that works for the common good. It places humans in control by separating ethics from politics. Know when to be a cunning fox and when to be a strong lion. You don't need to be virtuous, but you need to appear so. For rulers, if you can't be both loved and feared, be feared, but not hated. Discipline effectively. Punish

sparingly. And never be cruel. The outcome is the goal, but the means you take matter. I mean that. The means *always* matter.

Montaigne: That's all the time we have for today. I want to thank my guests, Sir Thomas More and Niccolo Machiavelli. If you made it to the end of this podcast, congrats! I hope you feel like you've earned at least a graduate certificate. Remember, friends, to look inside yourself—doubt, question, reflect—and embrace the uncertainty of life and all its wondrous, human complexities.

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