

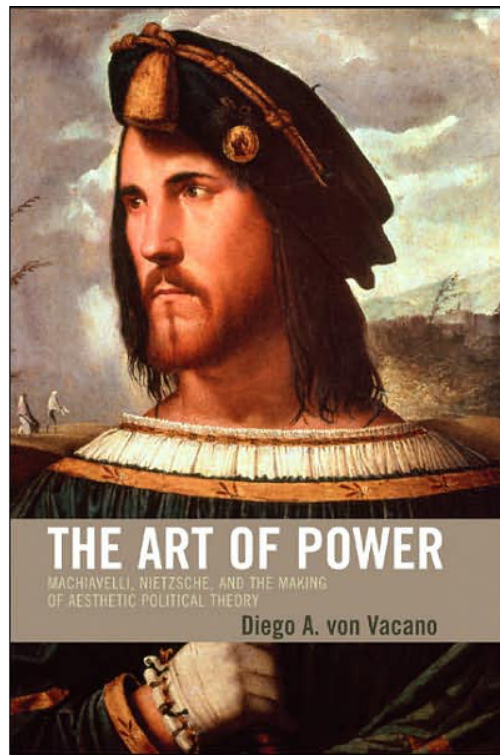
Book Review of**The Art of Power: Machiavelli, Nietzsche and the Making of Aesthetic Political Theory**

by Diego A. von Vacano (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007)

reviewed by Horst Hutter (Concordia University)

Von Vacano's book deals with a very difficult topic. This difficulty is mainly due to the contradictions within the concept of aesthetics. "Aesthetics" is one of the most misused terms in the confused discourses of both popular and academic culture. It purveys an almost systematic ambiguity that seems to define the confusion of modern understandings concerning art, morality, politics, ethics, as well as good, bad, and evil. It suggests a dangerous link between beauty and evil and the possibility that it might be possible to live happily in an amoral, even immoral fashion. It appeals to the lure of human emancipation from all "divinely" inspired moral codes. The concept of the aesthetic thus bespeaks the ever greater destruction of the fictive unity of the good and the beautiful, a unity that had been projected as the necessary foundation of Christian culture. For moralists of every stripe, it suggests the dangerous attraction of a politics of the spectacle associated with the excesses of the various fascisms and other forms of totalitarian ventures of the 20th century. The "satanic principle" itself seems to be at work in the fashionable celebration of a purely "aesthetic justification of life." The secret admiration in the souls of many very confused citizens of liberal societies for radical actors of various ideological tendencies, daring in their disregard of commonly accepted moral standards, further threatens to unleash hitherto hidden and very unpleasant psychic energies.

This very "ideological" discourse has led to egregious misunderstandings of important philosophers of the 19th century who had begun to question the Platonisms ensconced in Christian culture. Thus, thinkers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, with their emphases on the principles of aesthetics, have seemed to make it possible for outright cynics to dispense with any kind of



hypocritical masking of their “vices,” with any kind of obeisance to “virtue.” Key portions of their visions have been invoked as justifications for political programs with very harmful consequences for many individuals. Defensive reactions against such confusions, however, evinced especially by what Nietzsche termed “morality screamers,” have equally missed entirely the original understanding of aesthetic discourse. This discourse had been formulated by enlightenment thinkers on a simple use of the Greek terms *aisthesis* that merely designates the human capacity for sense experience. Baumgarten and Kant, among others, had adopted this term to indicate a path to understanding distinct from reasoning. It is a great virtue of von Vacano’s excellent book to cut right through these confusions and to base a sophisticated vision of an aesthetic politics on solid conceptual grounds.

The author begins his analysis with a clarification of the concept of aesthetics. Accordingly, it points to the importance of bodily existence as the foundation for all political knowledge, both for rulers and for the ruled. He then proceeds to show how bodily existence and its vagaries constitutes the core of both Machiavelli’s and Nietzsche’s philosophical anthropology. Emotions, imaginations, the experiences of pain and pleasure and their expressions, and the forms of creativity and political representation that they make possible, become the primary loci of reality for both thinkers. Both are thereby also led to reject any a-priori truths and to postulate an always-limited “perspectivism” as the inevitable result of the materiality of the world. Human limitations, finitude, the preponderance of pain over pleasure and the absence of any certitude about any “divine” shaping of history render all human enterprises subject to the rule of fortune. The world as such, being a “broken world,” would make fear and anxiety the preponderant forms of emotionality. Any success by some individuals or groups in the search for finite and scarce goods arouses the envy of others. Greed for material enjoyments renders all humans both envious of one another and ungrateful to each other. Ingratitude in turn manifests itself in three ways: 1) as the fact that there may be no reward for good deeds, 2) as the tendency to forget favors received, and 3) as the tendency to hurt even those who have bestowed good. The “evils” thus consequent to these propensities involve inevitable implications in cycles of revenge. They are evils that never die. Everything is contingent, and everything is uncertain, except for pain and death. The only hope humans have for a stable acquisition and enjoyment of the goods of fortune rest upon the establishment of durable political structures that contain anxiety and limit human deprivations of humans. Insight into these tragic inconstancies makes the attainment of a stable and durable political order the most important project. For Machiavelli, such an order can best be achieved in a stable republican system. The virtue of individuals from ruling strata would consist in foresight, flexibility, and defiance. This virtue might require “cruelty well-used” as the price to be paid for strength, independence, durability, and even freedom.

The author considers Machiavelli and Nietzsche to be “mirror images of each other” across the centuries. Both were artists of words who wrote proleptically. The propositions contained in their works are not only meant to inform readers but also to induce them to act differently, thereby

to transform them. An important conclusion from this comparison is the insight into Nietzsche as a profoundly political thinker. Nietzsche is thus neither non-political nor yet anti-political, as he had so often been misinterpreted by even judicious scholars, but always seemingly on a very narrow conception of the “political.” Taking into account Machiavelli’s well-known lack of interest in any kind of Christian soul care, his political vision would be primarily focused on statecraft. The politics of Nietzsche, by contrast, might have to be designated as a politics of soul-craft. Freedom in Machiavelli’s vision would be conceived primarily as the good order and political independence of a state, whereas in Nietzsche’s vision it would have to be described as personal autonomy. Both thinkers conceived human individuals to be largely governed by unconscious and mutually contradictory passions. Both thus deny implicitly and explicitly the Augustinian doctrine of freedom of the will. Strength of willing and forceful egos would thus at best be the rare achievements of some. Among the mutually warring emotions, certain structures would be stronger than others. Pain, and fear, as the expectation of pain, are among the strongest and most dependable for usage in politics. Lust would forever be at war with love and friendship. The author suggests that for Machiavelli as well as for Nietzsche this natural disorder, both within and between individuals, and within and between groups, may to some extent be abated by the healing effects of religion. Both thinkers thus conceived religion to be of fundamental “political” importance.

More could and should have been said about the political functions of religion in the work of both Machiavelli and Nietzsche: it would seem that for them as, either profoundly anti-Christian or at least non-Christian thinkers, religious teachings would at best be never more than salutary myths, or, to invoke Plato, noble lies. It could have been pointed out that one major difference between Machiavelli and Nietzsche concerns their quite different attitudes toward Christianity. Machiavelli needed to write “esoterically” in a society that was still profoundly imbued with Christian myths and symbols, a society in which it was dangerous to openly attack the Church. Nietzsche, by contrast, was confronted by a form of Christianity in nihilistic disintegration. He could thus afford to openly “declare war” on the Christian faith structures, with his esotericism being concerned primarily with initiating a new form of religiosity that had yet to be, and still is not, congealed into a new kind of salutary myth. All myth making is inevitably a form of esotericism. Hence, Machiavelli is rightly seen by von Vacano as having created the “Valentino myth,” one of *his* main forms of esoteric myth-making in the deceptively laudatory portrait he draws of Cesare Borgia in *The Prince*. Moreover, von Vacano judiciously draws on Machiavelli’s extensive poetical production in support of the mythological and hence esoteric basis of his teaching. Yet Machiavelli’s poetical-political myths are very different from those of Nietzsche. The different historical circumstances of Nietzsche required him, for the fulfillment of his fated *Aufgabe*, to engage in myth-making at a far deeper and more encompassing level. Machiavelli could presuppose a soul-regime established based on an admittedly weakened and “Italian” form of Catholicism, whereas Nietzsche was confronted with the task of having to cre-

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ate entirely new structures of soul by creating a new myth of the soul and its destiny. It is to be noted, however, that these differences between Machiavelli and Nietzsche are due to different historical circumstances and repose on major commonalities concerning philosophical anthropology, political psychology as well as on what might be called their existential cosmologies. In both cases, moreover, their opposition to Christian myths would remain influenced by those very myths, since the terms of every polemic remain structured by the conceptual system against which it is a polemic. Thus, the author points out that Machiavelli was very much a man of his times in his belief in astrology and his acceptance of some aspects of a monotheistic faith.

Von Vacano bases his interpretation of Machiavelli not so much on his political and historical writings, such as the *Prince*, the *Discourses*, and the *History of Florence*, but on his poetry and his letters. He illuminates the mytho-poetic structure of the political writings by showing how the philosophical anthropology and the existential psychology contained in Machiavelli's poetry define the intentionality of his political understanding. A very original point concerns the author's use of Machiavelli's poem *The Ass* as the foundation for describing his anthropology, his psychology, and his cosmology. He shows how *The Ass* is a re-creation of an early novelistic poem by the 2nd century Platonist author Apuleius. Apuleius had written his poem partially as an attack on the Christian myth of the soul which was ascendant in the Roman Empire at the time but which had not yet achieved its definitive Augustinian version or its Constantinian dominance. While pagan in its Apuleian intentionality, the myth could also be assimilated to a Christian form, as the ass is also both a Judaic and a Christian symbol. Machiavelli re-creates this story of a human person who gets transformed into various animal incarnations such as an ass and a pig and shows the descent of that person into a quasi-pagan Hades, but within the spiritual context of Renaissance Christianity and very much inspired by Dante. Machiavelli is thereby enabled to launch a very potent but hidden attack on Christian spirituality, hidden because of an author's "poetic" license. A key point of von Vacano's interpretation of Nietzsche then is established by the fact that Nietzsche also uses the myth of the animal transformation of human beings in the forth part of Zarathustra. Nietzsche, however, thoroughly modernizes the myth, but, like Machiavelli, also uses it as a vehicle for providing a spiritual and political alternative to the Christian understanding of the link between humans and animals, a theme very much discussed in recent literature, such as in Agamben's *Man and the Animal*. This then also means that von Vacano rightly considers Zarathustra to be the main work of Nietzsche that contains his entire vision. He thereby both implicitly and explicitly criticizes those interpretations of Nietzsche that reject Zarathustra as not being sufficiently serious as a "philosophical" text or as being a bad and careless piece of writing; Nietzsche supposedly did not show the care shown in his other works in composing Zarathustra. He thus perhaps had not really resolved the "ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy" firmly in favor of "philosophy."

The author's very intelligent use of these animal myths not only shows the important and deep linkages between Machiavelli and Nietzsche but also shows how such mythologizing may

be used to express anti-Christian views. He emphasizes that both Machiavelli's and Nietzsche's use of the ass symbol are a replication of Apuleius, who also had used a similar symbolism and also with the same political intentions of attacking Christianity from a pagan perspective. He acknowledges that Apuleius was a Platonist; one would hence suppose that Apuleius, because of his closer temporal propinquity to Plato himself, might be much better in his understanding of Plato than any modern could be. This would then mean that Apuleius as a Platonist would not and might not have seen any incompatibility between his understanding of Plato's critique of imitative poetry and his own use of imitative poetry to formulate a pagan and *Platonic* attack on early Christianity. Given the stability of mythical reasoning across historical time, especially within the same cultural tradition, might not the same observations be made concerning Machiavelli's and Nietzsche's uses of quasi-pagan myths? Might not neither Machiavelli nor Nietzsche have had a literalist understanding of the Platonic arguments against imitative poetry and its possible link to aesthetic theory? Might not then their attacks on Christianity be an attack on a Christian mis-reading of Plato, that is to say, on a Platonism? It was Nietzsche, after all, who declared Christianity to be a Platonism for the people and who expressed his profound admiration for Plato by declaring him to be the "philosopher with the greatest strength ever."

The many criticisms of Plato in this otherwise very cogently argued book seem to miss the fundamental ambiguities of Plato's critique of imitation and aestheticism, as this critique can hardly be taken literally, since they occur in a work of imitative poetry. Furthermore, Nietzsche very much saw himself as a successor and rival of Plato in his attempt to lay the foundations for a new cultural dispensation for the "people of humankind." In this regard, he saw his Zarathustra as a piece of writing in the manner of Plato, even expressing at one point to a friend his astonishment about how much he unconsciously "Platonizes" in this text. My acquaintance of Machiavelli is too scarce for me to be able to say if he also was aware that his attack on the Platonic tradition was simultaneously a hidden affirmation of this very tradition. The fact that, as stressed by von Vacano, he confirmed the profound political importance of religion, while also being resolutely non-Christian, would suggest a "dialectical" ambiguity resembling that of Nietzsche and of Plato toward religions. This would then also make sense of how Nietzsche described the strategy of Plato as consisting in publicly advocating theorems in which he did not even remotely believe himself, such as perhaps also the so-called "theory of ideas." In short, Plato was a "liar," something very much affirmed by Nietzsche with the further proviso that Plato, being the "royal hermit of the spirit" that he was, simply arrogated to himself the right to "lie." One might point in this context to the extensive discussion of lying, the "pseudos" in *The Republic*, an aspect of Plato not at all considered by the author. Furthermore, it is quite well known, as confirmed in this astute book, that Machiavelli was not beyond lying himself and firmly believed in the importance of lying as a tool of statecraft. Finally, "aesthetic political theory" is ably described and advocated by the author as having initially been developed by Machiavelli and Nietzsche upon a Platonic template; its main emphasis is on imitation, representation and appeals to sense experience, on

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what might be termed showmanship. If this is the case, would one not have to conclude that the practitioners of aesthetics in politics must necessarily also arrogate to themselves the right to “lie”? The question presents itself, whether the “misreading” of Plato in this text is a piece of esoteric writing.

The last chapter of the book deals with political events in recent history such as the public spectacles in fascist regimes that are best understood in terms of aesthetic political theory. A key example provided in this connection is Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will*. Further, the author compares the Vietnam War, which was very much and continuously present in the public media, to the war in Central America, which was almost totally absent from public consciousness. In a sense, the latter war did not “exist,” even though it resulted in many deaths. He concludes from this that events that do not show up on the radar screen of the public media may well occur but simply do not exist politically. This presents frightening possibilities, encompassed within the domain of aesthetic political theory, for political elites to manipulate the flow of information and thereby to be able to engage in many nefarious actions very much even to the harm of millions of human beings. If the concentration camps can be kept out of public awareness, then they can “exist “without really mattering. The author criticizes Arendt’s notion that politics is inherently public as being problematical, for in Machiavelli’s and Nietzsche’s view, politics occurs in the “. . . realm of appearances and (mis)representation, (from which) it is clear that there are some forms of politics that are inherently *not* public” (169, emphasis in text). But might this not mean that aesthetic political theory is inherently fascist? The author counters this possible conclusion by pointing out that fascist and Marxist politics are totalitarian, and that “totalitarian” regimes cannot be described or explained by aesthetic political theory. The emphasis of this theory is on sense experience which is always bodily, finite, and limited. Every attempt at establishing total control over all aspects of a society would ultimately necessarily fail, due to the brokenness and finitude of the world and everything in it. Arendt’s perspective rests on a Kantian moralism, which is universal in its claims, and aesthetic theory shuns all universal moralism, due to its commitment to recognizing human limitations. Indeed, its great virtue consists precisely in its ability to undermine all forms of “moral” politics that may be destroyed precisely by the very attacks of Machiavelli and Nietzsche on moralisms and their “public” representation by “morality screamers.” It might even be suggested that totalitarian politics are inherently moralistic politics with universal claims, and that the best way to combat such politics is through an “aesthetic” perspective, as developed in this book.

Yet it would seem to be the case that modern politics are very much governed by moralisms derived from all religious traditions. Leading members of these traditions engage in radical and resolute programs of, among other things, activities of “ethnic cleansing” and many other kinds of murderous practices. They may even have learned that, if such practices can be kept hidden, they can remain in the limbo of “non-existent existents.” Does this not mean that all modern politics, given the universal availability of using the media to arrange for spectacles of all kinds,

is inherently fascistic and that spectacles can be arranged to hide ugly and unpleasant things under a veil of beautiful seeming? In the view of this reviewer, the author does not sufficiently deal with the power of moralistic politics and the terrible possibilities of propaganda and the manifold problems of lying that they involve. Nietzsche foresees an end to the moral period in the evolution of human cultures and the coming of a post-moral epoch. But we are certainly very far from any cessation of the power of hypocritical moralism in politics and the ever more skillful employment of propaganda. Meanwhile, aesthetic political theory may be said, in my opinion at least, to provide the best way for educating political elites. But such a program of education would have to pay close attention to the very subtle discussions of “lying” in Plato, Machiavelli, and especially in Nietzsche. It would have to be an education in the management of spectacles, and following the three major thinkers discussed in the book, an education in how to “lie” judiciously in the service of the public good. A discussion of the problems of “lying” involved in such an education would have to begin with an analysis of the discourse on the *pseudos* in *The Republic*. However, since such a discussion would lead too far afield, I shall limit myself to a brief concluding statement on the discourse on “lying” in Nietzsche and its connections to aesthetic political theory. While these problems are adumbrated in the book, they are not developed with sufficient clarity, mainly due perhaps to the author’s systematic and “esoteric” misreading of Plato.

Lying is currently a very hot topic in the relevant literature in Social Psychology which may well owe its prominence to the impetus given to the topic by Nietzsche. One of the insights that emerge from Nietzsche’s discussion of these issues is that the problem of lying is far from simple. It is for this reason that I have placed the term in quotation marks at some points. To be sure, we can agree on calling those persons unambiguously liars who deliberately and knowingly misrepresent sense experiences evident to them. This form of misrepresentation of facts would seem to be virtually unavoidable in politics, given the fact that much of especially international politics is polemical; surely no one would dispute that misrepresentation of facts is a tool of warfare. But what about unconscious and what might be termed “sincere” lying? From Nietzsche’s understanding, much of what is called faith could be so described. Indeed, he seems to think of the whole Judaic and Christian traditions as systematic falsifications “in psychologicis.” Moreover, in so far as Machiavelli supports the Christian faith, while not really accepting it for himself, he could be seen to affirm a similar conclusion. But the problem is infinitely complicated by the limitations of all human language. Nietzsche rejects any kind of correspondence theory of truth. In his view language is metaphor and rhetoric, and hence there can never be any exact transposition of any sense datum into a speech act. Something is always left out. Every speech act both reveals and conceals, since all language is metaphor and rhetoric. Hence such involuntary “lying” is quite unavoidable.

These insights would seem to belong to the very essence of aesthetic political theory, insofar as it emphasizes the finitude and limitations of all things human, *including language*. The biblical divinity is believed within all Abrahamic traditions to have

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spoken completely unambiguously to Adam and Eve. Yet the story of the Fall would indicate at the very least a bifurcation of meaning due to the ever-present duality of the speaker and the addressee. Thus it would not seem to be possible for there to ever be any one-valued ontology on the basis of an always at least two-valued logic. In addition, we know from 19th century developments in logic that the human mind, in an ineluctably pluralistic universe, is capable of conceiving many-valued systems of reasoning. The Abrahamic stories would then be merely myths that sustain systems of power and structures of rule. In short, they are noble and politically useful “lies.” The arguments of this book would lead me to conclude that for Machiavelli the Christian religion could be so described. In addition, Nietzsche definitely argues in this manner. Concluding, I would suggest that these theorems could be developed so as to remove the fascistic aspect from aesthetic political theory.

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