

## Praise for *Socrates Meets*

“How Peter Kreeft finds the time to write so many helpful books is beyond me. How he manages to fill them with such sensible wisdom is known to God alone. The *Socrates Meets* series is just further proof that we are witnessing something special.”

—**Fr. Gregory Pine**, OP, the Dominican House of Studies

“Peter Kreeft’s writing exhibits wit and erudition, but these qualities alone would not be enough to pull off the ambition of these texts: to explore major historical thinkers by putting each in dialogue with Socrates. A flexible and generous interpreter, Kreeft’s imagined conversations allow each thinker to speak for himself, while inviting the reader to participate in the dialectical questioning that draws out the ideas, appreciating their motivations and historical context, and, as often as not, putting them under gentle but critical scrutiny. Kreeft is above all a sensitive reader of texts, and he has composed works that invite new readers to learn how to think alongside, and in critical engagement with, many of modernity’s most influential minds.”

—**Joshua Hochschild**, Professor of Philosophy, Mount St. Mary’s University

“In this brilliant series, Peter Kreeft, like a modern-day Virgil, guides us into corners of purgatory where the father of philosophy, Socrates, instigates conversations with eight of the most provocative minds in Western history. We are in Kreeft’s debt for reminding us that philosophy is not essentially a college or university subject, a strange if not grotesque discipline we undergo in pursuit of a degree, but live mind encountering live mind in live conversation in pursuit of truth—and that the most fruitful conversations are often with the live minds of the dead. The humor and plainspokenness of this series make it ideal for beginning students of philosophy, whether in formal courses or in independent study, but the intellectual vigor of these dialogues will remind even the most seasoned thinkers that a bracing engagement with

Socratic questioning is the best way to shake up the complacency that too often obstructs the quest for wisdom.”

—**Daniel McNerny**, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy, Christendom College, and author of *Beauty & Imitation: A Philosophical Reflection on the Arts*

“Among the most formative influences on my development as a philosopher has been Peter Kreeft. When I first encountered his work when I was in college I could not believe that someone could make philosophy so accessible and so alive. Although I never took a formal class from Professor Kreeft, I have been a student of his for many decades. Through *The Unaborted Socrates* I was persuaded to embrace a sanctity of life ethic; through *The Best Things In Life* I was taught how to think about virtue, vice, intrinsic goodness, and practical Thomism (though the genius of Kreeft is that he never explicitly tells you he’s doing that). Later, when I was journeying back to the Church, it was Kreeft’s explication of the *Catechism* and his commentary on Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae* that helped me to see how Catholicism made sense and that much of what I believed as a lapsed-Catholic Evangelical was an inheritance from Rome and not something I had discovered by exercising my rational powers on Scripture alone. I thought I had hit a triple, but Kreeft showed me that I had been born at third base. What you will encounter in this series of cross-examinations of the world’s most important modern philosophers is Kreeft at his best. Through the character of Socrates and his famous interlocutors, you are introduced to some of the most influential and difficult thought in the history of philosophy, but in a way that requires no prior philosophical background. In the hands of this master teacher, you will come to appreciate both the strengths and the weaknesses of these towering figures and how the intellectual tradition of the Church ought to engage them.”

—**Francis J. Beckwith**, Professor of Philosophy and Associate Director of Graduate Studies in Philosophy, Baylor University

**SOCRATES**  
— MEETS —  
**MACHIAVELLI**



# SOCRATES — MEETS — MACHIAVELLI

— • —

THE FATHER OF  
PHILOSOPHY  
CROSS-EXAMINES  
THE FATHER OF  
MODERN POLITICAL  
PHILOSOPHY

— • —

PETER KREEFT

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# Preface

This book is one in a series of Socratic explorations of some of the Great Books. Books in this series are intended to be short, clear, and nontechnical, thus fully understandable by beginners. They also introduce (or review) the basic questions in the fundamental divisions of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, ethics, logic, and method. They are designed both for classroom use and for educational do-it-yourselfers. The *Socrates Meets* books can be read and understood completely on their own, but each is best appreciated after reading the little classic it engages in dialogue.

The setting—Socrates and the author of the Great Book meeting in the afterlife—need not deter readers who do not believe there is an afterlife. For although the two characters and their philosophies are historically real, their conversation, of course, is not and requires a “willing suspension of disbelief.” There is no reason the skeptic cannot extend this literary belief also to the setting.



# The Characters

SOCRATES: Here! Here, Niccolò, over here.

MACHIAVELLI: Who—what—where? Who are you, sir, that you dare to call me like a dog? Show yourself!

SOCRATES: I am right here, directly in front of you.

MACHIAVELLI: Well, I can't see you through all this damned fog. Where the hell am I?

SOCRATES: Fear not, you are not in hell.

MACHIAVELLI: I didn't mean it literally, you simpleton!

SOCRATES: Are you sure? Was that not your deepest fear?

MACHIAVELLI: I was not so dogmatic as to claim knowledge of the next world, like all those credulous Christians.

SOCRATES: And therefore you had no fear of what might await you? You did *not* claim to know that “all those credulous Christians” were *right* about there being an afterlife and a hell; did you claim to know that they were *wrong*?

MACHIAVELLI: I was a practical person. Correction: I *am* a practical person. (Why am I speaking of myself as if I were dead?)

SOCRATES: If you were a practical person, why did you not take measures against this feared and unknown future when you had the power to do so? Did this not contradict one of the most practical principles in your own book?

MACHIAVELLI: You've read my book?

SOCRATES: I have.

MACHIAVELLI: And . . . ?

SOCRATES: I admire your practical wisdom in many places. For instance . . . let's see . . . I know I remember the place—

MACHIAVELLI: You have my book there! I can see you now—why is there still this fog?

SOCRATES: The fog is only in your mind, my friend, as you will soon see. That's one of the peculiarities of this place. Ah, yes, here's the passage. I knew it was there in chapter 3, where you go on about the Romans, your heroes of practical wisdom. I quote—

MACHIAVELLI: Wait! Who are you? And why do you have my book with you? And what is this place?

SOCRATES: All in good time, my friend, all in good time. I will not be distracted from this point, this wonderfully wise passage—

MACHIAVELLI: You want to prove to me that I should have had the fear of hell—from my own words?

SOCRATES: Exactly.

MACHIAVELLI: Are you from the Inquisition?

SOCRATES: Oh, my, no! Nothing like that *here*. And yet, in a sense, you may say that I am a one-man inquisition. Inquiry, now, that's my thing. But none of those ridiculous threats of torture. No, no, I will not be distracted. Where's that passage? I've lost it again—

MACHIAVELLI: The middle of chapter 3. In the paragraph beginning with "The Romans."

SOCRATES: Thank you. Yes, there it is. You are wise to know exactly what I was going to read.

MACHIAVELLI: Then why waste time reading it?

SOCRATES: Oh, no time can be wasted here.

MACHIAVELLI: Here?

SOCRATES: For the last time, no more distractions! Here—

MACHIAVELLI: I hate that word!

SOCRATES: Listen to this:

The Romans did what all wise rulers must: cope not only with present troubles but also with ones likely to arise in the future, and assiduously forestall them. When trouble is sensed well in advance it can easily be remedied; if you wait for it to show itself any medicine will be too late because the disease will have become incurable. As the doctors say of a wasting disease, to start with it is easy to cure but difficult to diagnose;

after a time, unless it has been diagnosed and treated at the outset, it becomes easy to diagnose but difficult to cure. So it is in politics.

You knew this principle in regard to the body and the body politic; why did you not know it in regard to your soul?

MACHIAVELLI: Now I can see you—

SOCRATES: You must answer the question, you know, either sooner or later. There's no more hiding here.

MACHIAVELLI: You said that "here" is not hell.

SOCRATES: Correct.

MACHIAVELLI: I did die, didn't I?

SOCRATES: Correct again.

MACHIAVELLI: So is this heaven or purgatory?

SOCRATES: It is purgatory for you and heaven for me.

MACHIAVELLI: How can that be?

SOCRATES: It is for me a continuation of the most heavenly task I knew on earth: to inquire of the great sages, to pursue wisdom from those who know. For they are the opposite of myself, who do not know. And it will be purgatory for you as it was to my fellow citizens on earth. But here no one has power to give the gadfly a swat and send him away to the next world. This *is* the next world. You must endure my questions.

MACHIAVELLI: So you *are* my torturer.

SOCRATES: No, I am your friend.

MACHIAVELLI: My inquisitor.

SOCRATES: No, your teacher.

MACHIAVELLI: By means of inquisition.

SOCRATES: No, by means of inquiry. The unexamined life is not worth living, you know.

MACHIAVELLI: Now I see clearly, you ugly old man. I know who you are.

SOCRATES: I thought that would be obvious.

MACHIAVELLI: You're one of those Socrates impersonators. I've seen a dozen of you at the university. You're tediously unoriginal.

SOCRATES: I guess it's not so obvious after all. No, Niccolò, I am the genuine article, the original, I assure you.

MACHIAVELLI: So this is my purgatory: to be cross-examined by Socrates.

SOCRATES: I'm afraid so.

MACHIAVELLI: Do I have any alternatives? Any choice?

SOCRATES: No. We both have to fulfill our orders. They come from a higher authority. You see, every philosopher has to endure my questions. You are not alone.

MACHIAVELLI: Plato, too? Did Plato have to face you?

SOCRATES: Indeed he did.

MACHIAVELLI: How I would love to hear that exchange!

SOCRATES: It is not permitted. Not now, anyway. Perhaps later, much later. But now it would be a distraction. And that is exactly the opposite of what this place is for.

MACHIAVELLI: Must I answer to you for everything?

SOCRATES: Oh, my goodness, no! Only your work, not your life. And only your writing, not your other work. And only *The Prince*.

MACHIAVELLI: My masterpiece.

SOCRATES: That remains to be seen. I will tell you, however, that your book was one of the most influential ever written. Even though almost no one totally agreed with you, everyone was influenced by you. You have been called the father of modern political philosophy.

MACHIAVELLI: Ha! They said they didn't agree with me, but secretly they knew I spoke the truth—otherwise they would not have used me so fundamentally that I could be called “the father of modern political philosophy.” That is what you said, isn't it?

SOCRATES: Yes, but—

MACHIAVELLI: I like that title. I like it very much. Now I see why they sent you to meet me. You are the real thing, aren't you?

SOCRATES: Do I look like a Coke bottle?



MACHIAVELLI: A *what*?

SOCRATES: A feeble jest. You will understand it later. (In fact, I do look remarkably like a Coke bottle.)

“The real thing,” you say: I wonder what you mean by that?

MACHIAVELLI: Ah, now I know you are indeed the real thing, Socrates; I recognize your fingerprint, your almost addicted desire for definitions. So this *is* the next world! Ah—look here, Socrates, I’m going to make you an offer you can’t refuse. Employ me! Make me your partner here. I have just what you need for this job: the extensive knowledge of real life, not just ideas, and real human beings, not just ideal human nature. I have much experience, and I have studied history.

SOCRATES: You have a very clever sense of humor, Niccolò.

MACHIAVELLI: I am totally serious, Socrates. I realize what this situation looks like from your point of view. You have the power, and you wonder what I could possibly offer you.

Well, Socrates, I know you will agree that understanding is the most valuable thing in the world, and I have never found among all my possessions anything that I hold more dear than my understanding of the deeds of great men—as you must know if you have read my book. So I hope it will not be presumptuous for a man of low and humble status to advise you, O great Socrates, the wisest man in the world. For those in low valleys have a perspective on mountaintops and those who dwell on them that those dwellers do not and cannot have. You have climbed to the mountaintop of wisdom, leaving the mass of men back in the cave. For this very reason, I, who have made it my lifelong task to explore the cave, can teach you about the men who dwell there and about how they fight about shadows. You know the true good, but I know more about falsehood and lies and evil.

And if, in your heavenly wisdom, you look down to the realms of darkness in which I have lived, you will understand that I am truly an expert on the subject of evil fortune.

SOCRATES: You *are* serious, aren't you?

MACHIAVELLI: Absolutely. Employ me, Socrates. What a combination we would make!

SOCRATES: You're not acting?

MACHIAVELLI: No, why do you keep asking that?

SOCRATES: Because you are parodying yourself. Have you forgotten what you wrote in the dedicatory letter to Lorenzo the Magnificent that you put at the beginning of your book? You used the same argument, even the same imagery, to persuade him to employ you—and the same shameless flattery and insult—

MACHIAVELLI: Insult? No! Not to you!

SOCRATES: You devoted a whole chapter of *The Prince* to the subject of flatterers: "How sycophants are to be avoided." And you sent the book to Lorenzo as a job application with a cover letter of shameless flattery! You must have thought the mind of Lorenzo the Magnificent to be something less than magnificent. And mine as well, if you thought I would not see that contradiction.

MACHIAVELLI: You have no peer in that, Socrates. Spotting contradictions is to you what finding ants is to an anteater.

SOCRATES: Well, at least we have left the realm of flattery . . .

MACHIAVELLI: Will you open your mind to my proposal?

SOCRATES: Even if I were tempted to consider it—which I am not—it is impossible. It is forbidden. We two have another task to perform here, and you are not my co-examiner but my examinee.

MACHIAVELLI: Ah, I understand. I would not dream of opposing your Master's will. By the way, *you* have never considered that option, have you? Just as a thought experiment, of course. I think you are interested in all thought experiments. Perhaps you could use my experience and expertise to explore what is possibly the only thought experiment you have never explored—

SOCRATES: Stop! Hush! Do you think I am as naïve as the woman in the garden? Or—to speak in terms of *your* categories—who do you think holds the power here?

MACHIAVELLI: You misunderstand my intention.

SOCRATES: I cannot know intentions. There is, however, One who can. So I would strongly suggest you avoid dallying with that “thought experiment,” even for one second. For though you may indeed deceive me, I am not in charge here. I think you know who is.

MACHIAVELLI: I shall be as pious as a sheep. What must I do to be saved?

SOCRATES: (Even now the fool toys with the fire!) Many things, my friend, but for now, only one preliminary thing: you must “know thyself.” That is why I was sent to you. I shall hold up your own book to be a mirror.

MACHIAVELLI: You will correct me?

SOCRATES: No, I will question you, and you will answer; and, if you will, you shall correct yourself.

MACHIAVELLI: Of course. Your famous “Socratic method.” Well, since it seems I have no choice, proceed.

SOCRATES: You *have* a choice. That is what a question is: a choice. Two roads open out, at least, after every question: yes and no. And it is your choice alone that will determine the path you take. I know you must understand because you have read Plato’s accounts of the questions I asked some of my fellow citizens in Athens, and you are a very intelligent man.

MACHIAVELLI: You know me well, Socrates. Let us proceed.

# The Contrast with Plato

SOCRATES: Where do you prefer to begin?

MACHIAVELLI: At the beginning.

SOCRATES: A wise choice. I take it you mean your title.

MACHIAVELLI: Yes. I would ask you not to compare *The Prince* with the book it seems to contradict the most, the book that is the most famous and influential one in all of philosophy, at least up until my time—

SOCRATES: Plato's *Republic*, you mean?

MACHIAVELLI: Yes. I know he was your favorite pupil, but—

SOCRATES: You do *not* know that. Actually, I have many problems with that book. You may be interested to know that it will continue to be the most influential book in the history of philosophy for many centuries, and that is why it is natural to compare it with your book. For you were the two pioneers of classical and modern political philosophy, as well as a classic contrast of temperaments: what a man named William James will call the tender-minded versus the tough-minded, the idealist versus the realist, the rationalist versus the empiricist, principles

versus facts—it seems a perfect setup. Why do you ask me not to use this comparison?

MACHIAVELLI: The answer is in the two titles. I wrote my book for a single reader: the man who is or wants to be a prince. I told him simply what works and what does not work—for him, for the prince. Plato wrote his *Republic* for a whole society, a *res publica*, a public reality. The “common good” always takes precedence over the private good in the *Republic*.

SOCRATES: This is a fact.

MACHIAVELLI: And a second difference is that Plato’s *res publica*, or public reality, was *not* a reality but a dream. When Plato himself tried to make his dream real in Syracuse, at the invitation of its ruler, it did not work at all. It was a disaster. The *Republic* is written to a man who does not exist: ideal human nature in the abstract.

SOCRATES: The disaster in Syracuse is also a fact. But whether or not ideal human nature exists is one of the great philosophical questions on which you differed with Plato. He was a metaphysical realist; he thought the *nature* of a thing was as real as the thing. But you were a nominalist: you thought that natures were only *nomina*, names, and that only concrete individual things were real. But your book is not about metaphysics, so we shall not argue that issue today—though it is useful to remember that many of your arguments in *The Prince* presuppose your metaphysical premise of nominalism. It is the other assumption, about the common good and the private good, that most sharply distinguishes your book, and your title, from Plato’s. It seems right to argue about that here. Why do you ask me not to do so?

MACHIAVELLI: Because our purposes were wholly different. Plato

claimed to define ideal social justice; I did not. I claimed to define the means to the end of political success; he did not.

SOCRATES: Fair enough, Niccolò. I accept that clarification. I shall confine my questioning to the pages of *your* book.

MACHIARELLI: Thank you, Socrates. You are more fair than I had thought you would be.

SOCRATES: What do you mean by “fair”? Is it the same as “just”? If so, why can we not discuss Plato’s question and try to define justice?

MACHIARELLI: I retract my compliment.

SOCRATES: I retract my question. I was teasing you, Niccolò. I shall confine my questioning to the pages of *your* book.

MACHIARELLI: Thank you.

SOCRATES: You begin, in chapter 1, by classifying all states into republics and principalities. Why do you begin there?

MACHIARELLI: Because you must know first the general layout, and then later the details, of whatever you want to master. I am writing to a prince, real or erstwhile—

SOCRATES: People no longer say “erstwhile,” except in Oxford and Cambridge. They say “wannabe.”

MACHIARELLI: If all your corrections are that mild, I’m in for an easy purgatory, I think.

SOCRATES: Alas, no. For now comes the *least* mild of all the questions that need to be asked.

MACHIAVELLI: Do what you must, Socrates.