

Niccolo Machiavelli: The Qualities of the prince

Written by Administrator

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The Prince' is a political treatise by the Florentine public servant and political theorist Niccolo Machiavelli. It is the most remembered, and the work responsible for bringing "Machiavellian" into wide usage as a pejorative term. It has also been suggested by some critics that the piece is, in fact, a satire. The views expounded by Machiavelli in the Prince may seem extreme. However, his whole life was spent in Florence at a time of continuous political conflict. Accordingly, Machiavelli emphasizes the need for stability in a prince's principality; at stake is its preservation. The book was written primarily as a guide for the prince to maintain his power and only secondarily as a guide for maintain the principality, the purpose of which was to keep the prince in power. The theories expressed in The Prince describe methods that an aspiring prince can use to acquire the throne, or an existing prince can use to maintain his reign. According to Machiavelli, the greatest moral good is a virtuous and stable state, and actions to protect the country are therefore justified even if they are cruel. Machiavelli strongly suggests, however, that the prince must not be hated. He states, "...a wise prince should establish himself on that which is his own control and not in that of others; he must endeavor to avoid hatred, as is noted". He also says "it is best to be both feared and loved; however, if one cannot be both it is better to be feared than loved".

The opening discourse of The Prince defines effective methods of governing in several types of principalities (for example, newly acquired vs. hereditary). Machiavelli explains to the reader, the "Magnificent Lorenzo de' Medici", member of the Florentine Medici family, the best ways to acquire, maintain, and protect a state. The methods described therein have the general theme of acquiring necessary ends by any means. The Prince examines the acquisition, perpetuation, and use of political power in the western world. Not intending his writing to be a scholarly treatise on political theory, Machiavelli wrote The Prince to prove his proficiency in the art of the state, offering advice on how a prince might gain and keep power. Machiavelli justified rule by force rather than by law. Accordingly, The Prince seems to justify a number of actions done solely to perpetuate power. It is a classic study of power – its acquisition, expansion, and effective use. He also makes a point of declaring that he will not discuss republics, stating, "Of Republics I shall not now speak, having elsewhere spoken of them at length. Here I shall treat exclusively of Princedoms, and, filling in the outline above traced out, shall proceed to examine how such States are to be governed and maintained". Having discussed the various types of principalities, Machiavelli turns to the ways a state can attack other territories or defend itself. The two most essential foundations for any state, whether old or new, are sound laws and strong military forces. A self-sufficient prince is one

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who can meet any enemy on the battlefield. However, a prince that relies solely on fortifications or on the help of others and stands on the defensive is not self-sufficient. If he cannot raise a formidable army, but must rely on defense, he must fortify his city. A well-fortified city is unlikely to be attacked, and if it is most armies cannot endure an extended siege. However, during a siege a virtuous prince will keep the morale of his subjects high while removing all dissenters. Thus, as long as the city is properly defended and has enough supplies, a wise prince can withstand any siege.

Machiavelli stands strongly against the use of mercenaries, troops hired to fight for a wage. He believes them useless to a ruler because they are undisciplined, cowardly, and without any loyalty, being motivated only by money. Machiavelli attributes the Italian city states' weakness to their reliance on mercenary armies. Machiavelli also warns against using auxiliary forces, troops borrowed from an ally, because if they win, the employer is under their favor and if they lose, he is ruined. Auxiliary forces are more dangerous than mercenary forces because they are united and controlled by capable leaders who may turn against the employer. The main concern for a prince should be war, or the preparation thereof. Through war a hereditary prince maintains his power or a private citizen rises to power. Machiavelli advises that a prince must frequently hunt in order to keep his body fit and learn the landscape surrounding his kingdom. Though this, he can best learn how to protect his territory and advance upon others similar. For intellectual strength, he is advised to study great military men so he may imitate their successes and avoid their mistakes. A prince who is diligent in times of peace will be ready in times of adversity. Machiavelli writes, "Thus, when fortune turns against him he will be prepared to resist it". Concerning the behavior of a prince toward his subjects, Machiavelli writes: "Many men have imagined republics and principalities that never really existed at all. Yet the way men live is so far removed from the way they ought to live that anyone who abandons what is for what should be pursues his downfall rather than his preservation; for a man who strives after goodness in all his acts is sure to come to ruin, since there are so many men who are not good". Since there are many possible qualities that a prince can be said to possess, he must not be overly concerned about having all the good ones. Also, a prince may be perceived to be merciful, faithful, humane, frank, and religious, but he should only seem to have these qualities. A prince cannot truly have these qualities because at times it is necessary to act against them. Although a bad reputation should be avoided, this is not crucial in maintaining power. The only ethic that matters is one that is beneficial to the prince in dealing with the concerns of his state.

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If a prince is overly generous to his subjects, Machiavelli asserts he will lose appreciation and will only cause greed for more. Additionally, being over-generous is not economical, because eventually all resources will be exhausted. This results in higher taxes and will bring grief upon the prince. Then, if he decides to discontinue or limit his generosity, he will be labeled as a miser. Thus, Machiavelli summarizes that guarding against the people's hatred is more important than building up a reputation for generosity. A wise prince should be more willing to be reputed a miser than be hated for. In answering the question of whether it is better to be loved than feared, Machiavelli writes, "The answer is of course, that it would be best to be both loved and feared. But since the two rarely come together, anyone compelled to choose will find greater security in being feared than in being loved". As Machiavelli asserts, commitments made in peace are not always kept in adversity; however, commitments made in fear are kept out of fear. Yet, a prince must ensure that he is not feared to the point of hatred, which is very possible. Above all, Machiavelli argues, do not interfere with the property of the subjects, their women, or the life of somebody without proper justification. Regarding the troops of the prince, fear is absolutely necessary to keep a large garrison united and a prince should not mind the thought of cruelty in that regard. For a prince who leads his own army, it is imperative for him to observe cruelty because that is the only way he can command his soldiers' absolute respect. Machiavelli compares two great military leaders: Hannibal and Scipio. Although Hannibal's army consisted of men of various races, they were never rebellious because they feared their leader. Scipio's men, on the other hand, were known for their mutiny and dissension. Machiavelli observes that most men are content as long as they are not deprived of their property and women. A prince should command respect through his conduct, because a prince that is highly respected by his people is unlikely to face internal struggles. Additionally, a prince who does not raise the contempt of the nobles and keep the people satisfied, Machiavelli assures, should have no fear of conspirators.

A prince earns honor by completing great feats. King Ferdinand of Spain is cited by Machiavelli as an example of a lowly monarch who gained esteem by showing his ability through great feats and who, in the name of religion, conquered many territories and kept his subjects occupied so that they had no chance to rebel. Regarding two warring states, Machiavelli asserts it is always wiser to choose a side, rather than to be neutral. Machiavelli then provides the following reasons why:

1. If your allies win, you benefit whether or not you have more power than they have.
2. If you are more powerful, then your allies are under your command; if your allies are

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stronger, they will always feel a certain obligation to you for your help.

3. If your side loses, you still have an ally in the loser.
- 4.

Machiavelli also notes that it is wise for a prince not to ally with a stronger force unless compelled to do so. In conclusion, the most important virtue is having the wisdom to discern what ventures will come with the most reward and then pursuing it courageously. The selection of quality servants is reflected directly upon the prince's intelligence, so if they are loyal the prince is considered wise; however, when they are otherwise, the prince is open to adverse criticism. Machiavelli asserts that there are three types of intelligence:

1. The kind that understands things for itself – which is great to have.
2. The kind that understands what others can understand – which is good to have.
3. The kind that does not understand for itself, nor through others – which is useless to have.
- 4.

If the prince does not have the first type of intelligence, he should at least have the second type. For, as Machiavelli states, "A prince must have the discernment to recognize the good or bad in what another says or does even though he has no acumen himself". A prudent prince should have a select group of wise counselors to advise him truthfully on matters all the time. All their opinions should be taken into account. Ultimately, the decision should be made by the counselors and carried out absolutely. If a prince is given to changing his mind, his reputation will suffer. A prince must have the wisdom to recognize good advice from bad. Machiavelli gives a negative example in Emperor Maximilian I; Maximilian, who was secretive, never consulted others, but once he ordered his plans and met dissent, he immediately changed them. Machiavelli argues that fortune is only the judge of half our actions and we have control over the other half. He expresses a high opinion of Cesare Borgia, but says he lost power because of unexpected illness. Machiavelli compares fortune to a torrential river that cannot be easily controlled during flooding season. In periods of calm, however, people can erect dams and levees in order to minimize its impact. Fortune, Machiavelli argues, seems to strike at the places where no resistance is offered, as is the case in Italy. Additionally, a prince's rule must be suited and adjusted for the times. In a more controversial metaphor, Machiavelli writes that "it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down". Some translations use the word "rape", although it is disputed. However, the attitude encapsulates Machiavelli's view of power and his understanding of the lust which follows it. A prince should imitate the

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actions of great men before him but only to a certain extent, adjusting certain respects of his predecessors' ideas.