

**LANDMARKS IN CRITICAL THINKING SERIES:  
MACHIAVELLI'S *THE PRINCE*  
INTRODUCTION BY MERRILEE H. SALMON (MODIFIED)**

Niccolò Machiavelli, born in 1469, wrote *The Prince* during 1513 while living in political exile at his country house outside of Florence. He had served as head of the second chancery of the Florentine republic but was dismissed after it fell in 1512. The Medici family was again ruling Florence, and a Medici also sat on the papal throne in Rome. Machiavelli tried unsuccessfully to use this treatise to gain an advisory appointment either to the papacy or the court of the Duke. *The Prince* was published in 1532, five years after Machiavelli died.

*The Prince* aroused controversy from its first appearance, and in 1559, it joined the works of Erasmus and other humanist scholars on the Papal Index of Prohibited Books. As a guide to princely behavior, the work falls into a genre common to the Renaissance and to the Classical periods. As a work of humanist scholarship, it shows a thorough grasp of classical writing style and draws examples from a wide variety of classical and biblical texts. Yet to describe *The Prince* as belonging to either of these categories understates its power and originality. Critics have praised Machiavelli for his sophistication, clarity, realism, subtlety, and irony. Some see his work as supporting a republican form of government by exposing the faults of princedoms, and praise his ability to separate political from moral issues. Other critics condemn him for being naive, promoting fraud, force, and immorality in politics, using beneficial ends to justify evil means, and betraying republican ideals. Each group of critics draws on the chapters of *The Prince* that are reproduced here to support its conflicting appraisals.

Machiavelli expresses the highest respect for Latin classical authors such as Cicero and Seneca. Yet *The Prince* takes a critical stance towards these sources while emulating them. For whereas Cicero and Seneca advise rulers to always tell the truth, be generous, and honor their promises, Machiavelli points out the negative consequences (for the state) when rulers adhere without exception to these moral standards. Machiavelli says that rulers should be truthful, keep promises, and the like when doing so will not harm the state, and that they should generally appear to have the traditional virtues. But since the goal of the ruler is to conquer and preserve the state, he should not shrink from wrongdoing when the preservation of the state requires this. Thus, the classical concept of civic virtue, which is a moral code applicable to rulers and subjects alike, is critically transformed in Machiavelli's concept of virtù, which pertains to rulers of states and can be at odds with moral virtue.

Another departure from classical and humanist models occurs in Chapter XVIII when Machiavelli urges rulers to take on the characteristics of animals (the fox and the lion) by using cunning and force when the situation requires. Although Machiavelli refers to classical accounts of rulers being trained by centaurs, his suggestion that rulers be less than fully human critically challenges the humanist tradition which would never have humans behave as beasts. Machiavelli critically analyzes the crucial characteristics of successful rulers, distinguishing, for example, between standards of discipline appropriate for military campaigns and for rulers when they are not commanding armies. Similarly, when Machiavelli discusses the concepts of cruelty and mercy, he presents examples to show that actions which might seem at first glance to be cruel are merciful in the circumstances, and vice versa.

Following the classical authors he admires, Machiavelli employs the conditional patterns of argumentation developed by the Stoic logicians. He frequently uses the dilemma form since this is useful for presenting alternative courses of action along with their consequences. He skillfully avoids being caught in false dilemmas, however. For example, when considering whether it is better to be loved or feared, he first points out that it is desirable--though not easy--to be both loved and feared.

Machiavelli always backs up his advice to rulers with examples from history, mostly classical history. In this way, he is much like a modern social scientist, attempting to use the scientific method (gathering pieces of data from history to make a broad hypothesis about human nature) to come up with laws that govern human nature. Like an Enlightenment scholar before his time, Machiavelli uses inductive logic to illustrate his hypotheses. His carefully chosen examples serve to bring down to earth and to make vivid his abstract generalizations.

The advice in *The Prince* must be read critically and not as a collection of recipes for success. Machiavelli liked people who won, like Julius II and Alexander VI, who were known as overly secular and ungodly popes. He was genuinely concerned about the future of Florence and therefore wrote what he thought it needed to heal. Machiavelli believed only a dictator could accomplish his immediate political goal, which was to unify Italy. The hero of *The Prince*, therefore is Cesare Borgia, the illegitimate son of Pope Alexander VI. Cesare was suspected of murdering his brother and conquered several cities in central Italy before he died in battle on his quest to unify the seven Italian city-states into one country. Machiavelli hoped the next Italian ruler would emerge from the Medici family and in fact dedicated his book to Lorenzo de Medici, duke of Urbino.

The lessons then that Machiavelli offers to princes are lessons in critical thinking. Rulers must learn how to make distinctions, how to consider alternative courses of action and evaluate their consequences, how to assess critically conflicting advice from various sources. If they are to preserve and maintain their states, they need to know how to apply general information about human nature to the particular circumstances that they face before taking any action.

His name, Machiavellian, has come to mean ruthless political expediency.

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**Excerpts from**  
***THE PRINCE***  
**By Niccolò Machiavelli**  
**(translated by Russell Price)**

**CHAPTER XIV**

**THAT WHICH CONCERNS A PRINCE ON THE SUBJECT OF THE ART OF WAR**

[Paragraph 1] A PRINCE ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study, than war and its rules and discipline; for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules, and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise from a private station to that rank. And, on the contrary, it is seen that when princes have thought more of ease than of arms they have lost their states. And the first cause of your losing it is to neglect this art; and what enables you to acquire a state is to be master of the art. Francesco Sforza, through being martial, from a private person became Duke of Milan; and the sons, through avoiding the hardships and troubles of arms, from dukes became private persons.

[Paragraph 2] For among other evils which being unarmed brings you, it causes you to be despised, and this is one of those ignominies against which a prince ought to guard himself, as is shown later on. Because there is nothing proportionate between the armed and the unarmed; and it is not reasonable that he who is armed should yield obedience willingly to him who is unarmed, or that the unarmed man should be secure among armed servants. Because, there being in the one disdain and in the other suspicion, it is not possible for them to work well together. And therefore a prince who does not understand the art of war, over and above the other misfortunes already mentioned, cannot be respected by his soldiers, nor can he rely on them. He ought never, therefore, to have out of his thoughts this subject of war, and in peace he should addict himself more to its exercise than in war; this he can do in two ways, the one by action, the other by study.

[Paragraph 3] As regards action, he ought above all things to keep his men well organized and drilled, to follow incessantly the chase, by which he accustoms his body to hardships, and learns something of the nature of localities, and gets to find out how the mountains rise, how the valleys open out, how the plains lie, and to understand the nature of rivers and marshes, and in all this to take the greatest care. Which knowledge is useful in

two ways. Firstly, he learns to know his country, and is better able to undertake its defense; afterwards, by means of the knowledge and observation of that locality, he understands with ease any other which it may be necessary for him to study hereafter; because the hills, valleys, and plains, and rivers and marshes that are, for instance, in Tuscany, have a certain resemblance to those of other countries, so that with a knowledge of the aspect of one country one can easily arrive at a knowledge of others. And the prince that lacks this skill lacks the essential which it is desirable that a captain should possess, for it teaches him to surprise his enemy, to select quarters, to lead armies, to array the battle, to besiege towns to advantage. Philopoemen, Prince of the Achaeans, among other praises which writers have bestowed on him, is commended because in time of peace he never had anything in his mind but the rules of war; and when he was in the country with friends, he often stopped and reasoned with them: "If the enemy should be upon that hill, and we should find ourselves here with our army, with whom would be the advantage? How should one best advance to meet him, keeping the ranks? If we should wish to retreat, how ought we to set about it? If they should retreat, how ought we to pursue?" And he would set forth to them, as he went, all the chances that could befall an army; he would listen to their opinion and state his, confirming it with reasons, so that by these continual discussions there could never arise, in time of war, any unexpected circumstances that he could not deal with.

[Paragraph 4] But to exercise the intellect the prince should read histories, and study there the actions of illustrious men, to see how they have borne themselves in war, to examine the causes of their victories and defeat, so as to avoid the latter and imitate the former; and above all do as an illustrious man did, who took as an exemplar one who had been praised and famous before him, and whose achievements and deeds he always kept in his mind, as it is said Alexander the Great imitated Achilles, Caesar Alexander, Scipio Cyrus. And whoever reads the life of Cyrus, written by Xenophon, will recognize afterwards in the life of Scipio how that imitation was his glory, and how in chastity, affability, humanity, and liberality Scipio conformed to those things which have been written of Cyrus by Xenophon.

[Paragraph 5] A wise prince ought to observe some such rules, and never in peaceful times stand idle, but increase his resources with industry in such a way that they may be available to him in adversity, so that if fortune changes it may find him prepared to resist her blows.

## **CHAPTER XV**

### **THE THINGS FOR WHICH MEN, AND ESPECIALLY RULERS, ARE PRAISED OR BLAMED**

[Paragraph 1] It remains now to consider in what ways a ruler should act with regard to his subjects and allies. And since I am well aware that many people have written about this subject, I fear that I may be thought presumptuous, for what I have to say differs from the precepts offered by others, especially on this matter. But because I want to write what will be useful to anyone who understands, it seems to me better to concentrate on what really happens rather than on theories or speculations. For many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist. However, how men live is so different from how they should live that a ruler who does not do what is generally done, but persists in doing what ought to be done, will undermine his power rather than maintain it. If a ruler who wants always to act honorably is surrounded by many unscrupulous men, his downfall is inevitable. Therefore, a ruler who wishes to maintain his power must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary.

[Paragraph 2] I shall set aside fantasies about rulers, then, and consider what happens in fact. I say that whenever men are discussed, and especially rulers (because they occupy more exalted positions) they are praised or blamed for possessing some of the following qualities. Thus one man is considered generous, another miserly (I use this Tuscan term because *avaro* in our tongue also signifies someone who is rapacious, whereas we call *miser* someone who is very reluctant to use his own possessions); one is considered a free giver, another rapacious; one cruel, another merciful; one treacherous, another loyal; one effeminate and weak, another indomitable and spirited; one affable, another haughty; one lascivious, another moderate; one upright, another cunning; one inflexible, another easy-going; one serious, another frivolous; one devout, another unbelieving; and so on.

*[Paragraph 3]* I know that everyone will acknowledge that it would be most praiseworthy for a ruler to have all the above-mentioned qualities that are held to be good. But because it is not possible to have all of them, and because circumstances do not permit living a completely virtuous life, one must be sufficiently prudent to know how to avoid becoming notorious for those vices that would destroy one's power and seek to avoid those vices that are not politically dangerous; but if one cannot bring oneself to do this, they can be indulged in with fewer misgivings. Yet one should not be troubled about becoming notorious for those vices without which it is difficult to preserve one's power, because if one considers everything carefully, doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one's ruin, whereas doing other things that seem vicious may strengthen one's position and cause one to flourish.

## **CHAPTER XVI**

### **GENEROSITY AND MEANNESS**

*[Paragraph 1]* To begin, then, with the first of the above-mentioned qualities, I maintain that it would be desirable to be considered generous; nevertheless, if generosity is practiced in such a way that you will be considered generous, it will harm you. If it is practiced virtuously, and as it should be, it will not be known about, and you will not avoid acquiring a bad reputation for the opposite vice. Therefore, if one wants to keep up a reputation for being generous, one must spend lavishly and ostentatiously. The inevitable outcome of acting in such ways is that the ruler will consume all his resources in sumptuous display; and if he wants to continue to be thought generous, he will eventually be compelled to become rapacious, to tax the people very heavily, and raise money by all possible means. Thus he will begin to be hated by his subjects and, because he is impoverished, he will be held in little regard. Since this generosity of his has harmed many people and benefited few, he will feel the effects of any discontent, and the first real threat to his power will involve him in grave difficulties. When he realizes this, and changes his ways, he will very soon acquire a bad reputation for being miserly.

*[Paragraph 2]* Therefore, since a ruler cannot both practice this virtue of generosity and be known to do so without harming himself, he would do well not to worry about being called miserly. For eventually he will come to be considered more generous, when it is realized that, because of his parsimony, his revenues are sufficient to defend himself against any enemies that attack him, and to undertake campaigns without imposing special taxes on the people. Thus he will be acting generously towards the vast majority, whose property he does not touch, and will be acting meanly towards the few to whom he gives nothing.

Those rulers who have achieved great things in our own times have all been considered mean; all the others have failed. Although Pope Julius cultivated a reputation for generosity in order to become pope, he did not seek to maintain it afterwards because he wanted to be able to wage war. The present King of France has fought many wars without imposing special taxes on his subjects because his parsimonious habits have always enabled him to meet the extra expenses. If the present King of Spain had a reputation for generosity, he would not have successfully undertaken so many campaigns.

*[Paragraph 3]* Therefore, a ruler should worry little about being thought miserly: he will not have to rob his subjects; he will be able to defend himself; he will avoid being poor and despised and will not be forced to become rapacious. For meanness is one of those vices that enable him to rule. It may be objected that Caesar obtained power through his open-handedness and that many others have risen to very high office because they were open-handed and were considered to be so. I would reply that either you are already an established ruler or you are trying to become a ruler. In the first case, open-handedness is harmful; in the second, it is certainly necessary to be thought open-handed. Caesar was one of those who sought power in Rome; but if after gaining power, he had survived and had not moderated his expenditure, he would have undermined his power. And if it should be objected that many rulers who have been considered very generous have had remarkable military successes, I would reply: a ruler spends either what belongs to him or his subject, or what belongs to others. In the former case, he should be parsimonious; in the latter, he should be as open-handed as possible. A ruler who accompanies his army, supporting it by looting, sacking, and extortions, disposes of what belongs to others; he must be open-

handed, for if he is not, his soldiers will desert. You can be much more generous with what does not belong to you or to your subjects, as Cyrus, Caesar and Alexander were. This is because giving away what belongs to others in no way damages your reputation; rather it enhances it. It is only giving away what belongs to yourself that harms you.

[Paragraph 4] There is nothing that is so self-consuming as generosity; the more you practice it, the less you will be able to continue to practice it. You will either become poor and despised or your efforts to avoid poverty will make you rapacious and hated. A ruler must above all guard against being despised and hated; and being generous will lead you to both. Therefore, it is shrewder to cultivate a reputation for meanness, which will lead to notoriety but not to hatred. This is better than being forced, through wanting to be considered generous, to incur a reputation for rapacity, which will lead to notoriety and to hatred as well.

## **CHAPTER XVII**

### **CRUELTY AND MERCIFULNESS; AND WHETHER IT IS BETTER TO BE LOVED OR FEARED**

[Paragraph 1] Turning to the other previously mentioned qualities, I maintain that every ruler should want to be thought merciful, not cruel; nevertheless, one should take care not to be merciful in an inappropriate way. Cesare Borgia was considered cruel, yet his harsh measures restored order to the Romagna, unifying it and rendering it peaceful and loyal. If his conduct is properly considered, he will be judged to have been much more merciful than the Florentine people, who let Pistoia be torn apart in order to avoid acquiring a reputation for cruelty. Therefore, if a ruler can keep his subjects united and loyal, he should not worry about incurring a reputation for cruelty; for, by punishing a very few, he will really be more merciful than those who over-indulgently permit disorders to develop, with resultant killings and plunderings. For the latter usually harm a whole community, whereas the executions ordered by a ruler harm only specific individuals. And a new ruler, in particular, cannot avoid being considered harsh, since new states are full of dangers.

Virgil makes Dido say:

*Res dura, et regni novitas me talia cogunt moliri, et late fines custode tueri.*

["Harsh necessity and the newness of my kingdom force me to do such things, and to guard all the frontiers."]

--Virgil, Aeneid, 563-4:

[Paragraph 2] Nevertheless, he should be slow to believe accusations and to act against individuals, and should not be afraid of his own shadow. He should act with due prudence and humanity so that being over-confident does not make him incautious and being too suspicious does not render him insupportable.

A controversy has arisen about this: whether it is better to be loved than feared, or vice versa. My view is that it is desirable to be both loved and feared; but it is difficult to achieve both and, if one of them has to be lacking, it is much safer to be feared than loved.

[Paragraph 3] For this may be said of men generally: they are ungrateful, fickle feigners and dissemblers, avoiders of danger, eager for gain. While you benefit them, they are all devoted to you; they would shed their blood for you; they offer their possessions, their lives, and their sons, as I said before, when the need to do so is far off. But when you are hard pressed, they turn away. A ruler who has relied completely on their promises and has neglected to prepare other defenses will be ruined because friendships that are acquired with money, and not through greatness and nobility of character, are paid for but not secured, and prove unreliable just when they are needed.

[Paragraph 4] Men are less hesitant about offending or harming a ruler who makes himself loved than one who inspires fear. For love is sustained by a bond of gratitude which, because men are excessively self-interested, is

broken whenever they see a chance to benefit themselves. But fear is sustained by a dread of punishment that is always effective. Nevertheless, a ruler must make himself feared in such a way that, even if he does not become loved, he does not become hated. For it is perfectly possible to be feared without incurring hatred. And this can always be achieved if he refrains from laying hands on the property of his citizens and subjects, and on their womenfolk. If it is necessary to execute anyone, this should be done only if there is a proper justification and obvious reason. But, above all, he must not touch the property of others because men forget sooner the killing of a father than the loss of their patrimony. Moreover, there will always be pretexts for seizing property; and someone who begins to live rapaciously will always find pretexts for taking the property of others. On the other hand, reasons or pretexts for taking life are rarer and more fleeting.

*[Paragraph 5]* However, when a ruler is with his army, and commands a large force, he must not worry about being considered harsh because armies are never kept united and prepared for military action unless their leader is thought to be harsh. Among the remarkable things recounted about Hannibal is that, although he had a very large army, composed of men from many countries, and fighting in foreign lands, there never arose any dissension, either among themselves or against their leader whether things were going well or badly. This could be accounted for only by his inhuman cruelty, which together with his many good qualities, made him always respected and greatly feared by his troops. And if he had not been so cruel, his other qualities would not have been sufficient to achieve that effect. Thoughtless writers admire this achievement of his, yet condemn the main reason for it.

*[Paragraph 6]* That his other qualities would not have sufficed is proved by what happened to Scipio, considered a most remarkable man not only in his own times but in all others, whose armies rebelled against him in Spain. The only reason for this was that he was over-indulgent and permitted his soldiers more freedom than was consistent with maintaining proper military discipline. Fabius Maximus rebuked him for this in the senate, and called him a corrupter of the Roman army. And when Locri was ravaged by one of Scipio's legates, the inhabitants were not avenged by him, and the legate was not punished for his arrogance, all because Scipio was too easy-going. Indeed, a speaker in the senate who wished to excuse him said that there were many men who were better at not committing misdeeds themselves than punishing the misdeeds of others. This character of his would eventually have tarnished his fame and glory if he had continued his military command unchecked; but, since he was controlled by the senate, this harmful quality was not only concealed but contributed to his glory.

*[Paragraph 7]* Returning to the matter of being feared and loved, then, I conclude that whether men bear affection depends on themselves, but whether they are afraid will depend on what the ruler does. A wise ruler should rely on what is under his own control, not on what is under the control of others; he should contrive only to avoid incurring hatred, as I have said.

## **CHAPTER XVIII**

### **HOW RULERS SHOULD KEEP THEIR PROMISES**

*[Paragraph 1]* Everyone knows how praiseworthy it is for a ruler to keep his promises and live uprightly and not by trickery. Nevertheless, experience shows that, in our times, the rulers who have done great things are those have set little store by keeping their word, being skillful rather in cunningly confusing men; they have got the better of those who have relied on being trustworthy.

You should know, then, that there are two ways of contending: one by using laws, the other, force. The first is appropriate for men, the second for animals; but because the former is often ineffective, one must have recourse to the latter. Therefore, a ruler must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means. This policy was taught to rulers allegorically by ancient writers: they tell how Achilles and many other ancient rulers were entrusted to Chiron the centaur, to be raised carefully by him. Having a mentor who was half-beast and half-man signifies that a ruler needs to use both natures, and that one without the other is not effective.

*[Paragraph 2]* Since a ruler, then, must know how to act like a beast, he should imitate both the fox and the lion, for the lion is liable to be trapped, whereas the fox cannot ward off wolves. One needs, then, to be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten away wolves. Those who rely merely upon a lion's strength do not understand matters.

*[Paragraph 3]* Therefore, a prudent ruler cannot keep his word, nor should he, when such fidelity would damage him and when the reasons that made him promise are no longer relevant. This advice would not be sound if all men were upright; but because they are treacherous and would not keep their promises to you, you should not consider yourself bound to keep your promises to them.

*[Paragraph 4]* Moreover, plausible reasons can always be found for such failure to keep promises. One could give countless modern examples of this and show how many peace treaties and promises have been rendered null and void by the faithlessness of rulers; and those best able to imitate the fox have succeeded best. But foxiness should be well concealed: one must be a great feigner and dissembler. And men are so naive and so much dominated by immediate needs that a skillful deceiver always finds plenty of people who will let themselves be deceived.

*[Paragraph 5]* I must mention one recent case: Alexander VI was concerned only with deceiving men, and he always found them gullible. No man ever affirmed anything more forcefully or with stronger oaths but kept his word less. Nevertheless, his deceptions were always effective because he well understood the naivety of men.

*[Paragraph 6]* A ruler, then, need not actually possess all the above-mentioned qualities but he must certainly seem to. Indeed, I shall be so bold as to say that having and always cultivating them is harmful, whereas seeming to have them is useful; for instance, to seem merciful, trustworthy, humane, upright and devout, and also to be so. But if it becomes necessary to refrain, you must be prepared to act in the opposite way and be capable of doing it. And it must be understood that a ruler, and especially a new ruler, cannot always act in ways that are considered good because, in order to maintain his power, he is often forced to act treacherously, ruthlessly or inhumanely, and disregard the precepts of religion. Hence, he must be prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain him and, as I said before, not deviate from right conduct if possible, but be capable of entering upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary.

*[Paragraph 7]* A ruler, then, should be very careful that everything he says is replete with the five above-named qualities: to those who see and hear him, he should seem to be exceptionally merciful, trustworthy, upright, humane and devout. And it is most necessary of all to seem devout. In these matters, most men judge more by their eyes than by their hands. For everyone is capable of seeing you, but few can touch you. Everyone can see what you appear to be, whereas few have direct experience of what you really are; and those few will not dare to challenge the popular view, sustained as it is by the majesty of the ruler's position. With regard to all human actions, and especially those of rulers, who cannot be called to account, men pay attention to the outcome. If a ruler, then, contrives to conquer, and to preserve the state, the means will always be judged to be honorable and be praised by everyone. For the common people are impressed by appearances and results. Everywhere the common people are the vast majority, and the few are isolated when the majority and the government are at one. One present-day ruler, whom it is well to leave unnamed, is always preaching peace and trust, although he is really very hostile to both; and, if he had practiced them, he would have lost either reputation or power several times over.

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