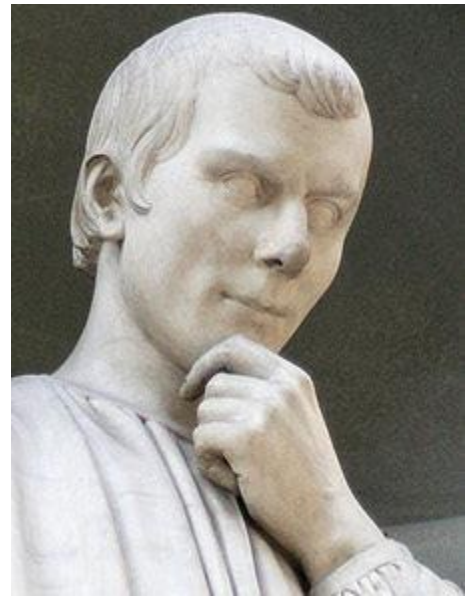


NICOLO MACHIAVELLI

Niccolo Machiavelli argued that whoever had the most power had the right to rule, to have authority over others, whether good or bad. Therefore, the job of political rulers is to acquire ever more power. Goodness and the right to rule are not enough to warrant leadership, according to Machiavelli. He stated that only a leader who can acquire and maintain adequate power to keep the state in order should rule.

It has been a common view among political philosophers that there exists a special relationship between moral goodness and legitimate authority. Many authors believed that the use of political power was only rightful if it was exercised by a ruler whose personal moral character was strictly virtuous. Thus rulers were counseled that if they wanted to succeed — that is, if they desired a long and peaceful reign and aimed to pass their office down to their offspring — they must be sure to behave in accordance with conventional standards of ethical goodness. Machiavelli rejected this perspective. It is precisely this moralistic view of authority that Machiavelli criticizes at length. For Machiavelli, there is no moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power. Rather, authority and power are essentially coequal: whoever has power has the right to command; but goodness does not ensure power and the good person has no more authority by virtue of being good. Thus, in direct opposition to a moralistic theory of politics, Machiavelli says that the only real concern of the political ruler is the acquisition and maintenance of power



For Machiavelli, power characteristically defines political activity, and hence it is necessary for any successful ruler to know how power is to be used. Only by means of the proper application of power, Machiavelli believes, can individuals be brought to obey and will the ruler be able to maintain the state in safety and security.

The legitimacy of law rests entirely upon the threat of coercive force; authority is impossible for Machiavelli as a right apart from the power to enforce it. Consequently, Machiavelli is led to conclude that fear is always preferable to affection in subjects, just as violence and deception are superior to legality in effectively controlling them. Machiavelli observes that “one can say this in general of men: they are ungrateful, disloyal, insincere and deceitful, timid of danger and avid of profit.... Love is a bond of obligation which these miserable creatures break whenever it suits them to do so; but fear holds them fast by a dread of punishment that never passes”

Concomitantly, a Machiavellian perspective directly attacks the notion of any grounding for authority independent of the sheer possession of power. For Machiavelli, people are compelled to obey purely in deference to the superior power of the state. If I think that I should not obey a particular law, what eventually leads me to submit to that law will be either a fear of the power of the state or the actual exercise of that power. It is power which in the final instance is necessary for the enforcement of conflicting views of what I ought to do; I can only choose not to obey if I possess the power to resist the demands of the state or if I am willing to accept the consequences of the state's superiority of coercive force.

For Machiavelli it is meaningless and futile to speak of any claim to authority and the right to command which is detached from the possession of superior political power. The ruler who lives by his rights alone will surely wither and die by those same rights, because in the rough-and-tumble of political conflict those who prefer power to authority are more likely to succeed. Without exception the authority of states and their laws will never be acknowledged when they are not supported by a show of power which renders obedience inescapable.

Machiavelli denies that living virtuously necessarily leads to happiness

When a prince decides to seize a state, he must determine how much injury to inflict. He needs to strike all at once and then refrain from further atrocities. In this way, his subjects will eventually forget the violence and cruelty. Gradually, resentment will fade, and the people will come to appreciate the resulting benefits of the prince's rule. Most important, a prince should be consistent in the way he treats his subjects.

Machiavelli stated 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

Machiavelli viewed misery as *one of the vices that enables a prince to rule*

Machiavelli saw ambition and spiritedness, and therefore war, as inevitable and part of human nature

Machiavelli explains repeatedly that religion is man-made, and that the value of religion lies in its contribution to social order and the rules of morality must be dispensed if security required it.

Machiavelli's concern with Christianity as a sect was that it makes men weak and inactive, delivering politics into the hands of cruel and wicked men without a fight.

Addressing the question of whether a citizen army is to be preferred to a mercenary one, he insists that the liberty of a state is contingent upon the military preparedness of its subjects. Acknowledging that “the king [of France] has disarmed his people in order to be able to command them more easily,” Machiavelli still concludes “that such a policy is ... a defect in that kingdom, for failure to attend to this matter is the one thing that makes her weak”. In his view, whatever benefits may accrue to a state by denying a military role to the people are of less importance than the absence of liberty that necessarily accompanies such disarmament. The problem is not merely that the ruler of a disarmed nation is in thrall to the military prowess of foreigners. More crucially, Machiavelli believes, a weapons-bearing citizen militia remains the ultimate assurance that neither the government nor some usurper will tyrannize the populace. Machiavelli is confident that citizens will always fight for their liberty—against internal as well as external oppressors. Indeed, this is precisely why successive French monarchs have left their people disarmed: they sought to maintain public security and order, which for them meant the elimination of any opportunities for their subjects to wield arms.

In much of his work, it seems that the ruler must adopt unsavory policies for the sake of the continuance of his regime.

A prince placed in power by nobles will find it more difficult to maintain his position because those who surround him will consider themselves his equals and his selection as prince arbitrary. However, a prince created by the people stands alone at the top. Not only are nobles much harder to satisfy than the people, they are less honest in their motives because they seek to oppress the people. The people, on the other hand, only seek to be left alone. If the people are hostile to the prince, the worst that can happen is desertion. However, if the nobles are hostile, the prince can expect both desertion and active opposition. Nobles are astute and cunning and always safeguard their interests.

In his opinion, Christianity allowed practical decisions to be guided too much by imaginary ideals and encouraged people to lazily leave events up to providence or, as he would put it, chance, luck or fortune. While Christianity sees modesty as a virtue and pride as sinful, Machiavelli took a more classical position, seeing ambition, spiritedness, and the pursuit of glory as good and natural things, and part of the virtue and prudence that good princes should have. Therefore, while it was traditional to say that leaders should have virtues, especially prudence, Machiavelli's use of the words *virtù* and *prudenza* was unusual for his time, implying a spirited and immodest ambition. Famously, Machiavelli argued that virtue and prudence can help a man control more of his future, in the place of allowing fortune to do so.

Machiavelli consistently and clearly distinguishes between a minimal and a full conception of “political” or “civil” order, and thus constructs a hierarchy of ends within his general account of communal life. A minimal constitutional order is one in which subjects live securely, ruled by a strong government which holds in check the aspirations of both nobility and people, but is in turn balanced by other legal and institutional mechanisms. In a fully constitutional regime, however, the goal of the political order is the freedom of the community, created by the active participation of, and contention between, the nobility and the people. Liberty forms a value that anchors Machiavelli's political theory and guides his evaluations of the worthiness of different types of regimes. Only in a republic, for which Machiavelli expresses a distinct preference, may this goal be attained

He maintains that the people are more concerned about, and more willing to defend, liberty than either princes or nobles. Where the latter tend to confuse their liberty with their ability to dominate and control their fellows, the masses are more concerned with protecting themselves against oppression and consider themselves “free” when they are not abused by the more powerful or threatened with such abuse. In turn, when they fear the onset of such oppression, ordinary citizens are more inclined to object and to defend the common liberty.

One of the main reasons that security and liberty remain, in the end, incompatible for Machiavelli—and that the latter is to be preferred—may surely be traced to the “rhetorical” character of his republicanism. Machiavelli clearly views speech as the method most appropriate to the resolution of conflict in the republican public sphere; throughout the *Discourses*, debate is elevated as the best means for the people to determine the wisest course of action and the most qualified leaders.