





## **Morality and Politics in the Thought of Niccolo Machiavelli**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The terms “Machiavellian” or Machiavellism find regular purchase among politician and philosophers concerned with a range of ethical, political, and psychological phenomena, even if Machiavelli did not invent “Machiavellism” and may not even have been a “Machiavellian” in the sense often ascribed to him. Moreover, in Machiavelli’s critique of “grand” philosophical schemes, we find a challenge to the enterprise of philosophy that commands attention and demands consideration and response. Thus, Machiavelli deserves a place at the table in any comprehensive survey of philosophy. Anyone who makes more than a hasty conclusion after an integral, unbiased reflection on his views will acknowledge the fact that though his thoughts were radical and “out of the normal” they were at least well intended. In this paper therefore we have examined his views on the place of morality in politics. And in the process we have established that contrary to the popular conceptions, Machiavelli was not totally antagonistic to moral goodness. Rather, he merely advised the Prince and Seekers of political power on how to gain and maintain their hold on power given the challenges of political intrigues of both friends and foes.

**Keyword:** morality, politics, Machiavelli philosophy, and political thoughts.

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **The Renaissance and its Impact on Machiavelli’s Political Thoughts.**

To comprehend the full importance of Machiavelli’s writings and context, it is important to understand the series of cultural, economic, social and political changes that began in the fourteenth century called the Renaissance. Its immediate impact was in Italy, which gradually spread to the rest of Europe by the late fifteenth century. The Renaissance signified a rebirth of the human spirit in the attainment of liberty, self-confidence and optimism (Mukherje, 140). In contradiction to the medieval view, which had envisaged the human being as fallen and depraved in an evil world with the devil at the

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centre, the Renaissance captured the Greek ideal of the essential goodness of the individual, the beauty and glory of the earth, the joy of existence, the insignificance of the supernatural and the importance of the present, as compared to an irrecoverable past and an uncertain future. This return to a pre-Christian attitude towards humans, God and Nature found expression in all aspects of human endeavour and creativity. Humanism, affirming the dignity and excellence of the human being, became the basis of comprehending the modern world. In contrast to the medieval Christian stress on asceticism, poverty, humility, misery and the worthlessness of the earthly person. Humanism defended the freedom of the human spirit and knowledge. The Renaissance signaled the breakdown of a unified Christian society.

At the centre of the Renaissance was the emergence of the new human, an ambitious restless individual, motivated by self-interest, seeking glory and fame. Self-realization and joy, rather than renunciation and asceticism, were seen as the true ends of human existence and education. Self-fulfillment was no longer viewed as being achieved by repressing natural faculties and emotions. The spirit of individualism and the cult of privacy led to the growth of self-assertion and ushered in the idea of the highest development of the individual.

Alongside the development of the modern individual was the beginning of the modern state. The idea of the modern state, omnipotent and omni competent, was worked out. The prince had to take charge of everything – preservation of public buildings and churches, maintenance of the municipal police, drainage of the marshes, ensuring the supply of corn, levying taxes and convincing the people of their necessity, supporting the sick and destitute, lending support to distinguished intellectuals and scholars on whose verdict rested his fame for the years to come.

Equally important was the end of the clerical monopoly and the replacement of papal supremacy by secular, sovereign, independent states, each with its own national culture, identity and language. The nation state came into existence and its success was determined not by religious but by political criteria. More than anyone else, it was Machiavelli who could understand the dynamics of this modern state and the modern individual and these were the core themes in his writings.

#### **The Prince: Analyzing Power**

It has been a common view among political philosophers that there exist a special relationship between moral goodness and legitimate authority. Many authors believe 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. In a sense, it was thought that rulers did well

when they did good; they earned the right to be obeyed and respected as they showed themselves to be virtuous and morally upright.

It is precisely this moralistic view of authority that Machiavelli criticizes at length in his best-known treatise, *The Prince*. For Machiavelli, there is no moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power (Rosen, 79). 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 (although he talks less about power per se than about ‘maintaining the state.’) In this sense, Machiavelli presents a trenchant criticism of the concept of authority by arguing that the notion of legitimate rights of rulership adds nothing to the actual possession of power. *The Prince* purports to reflect the self-conscious political realism of an author who is fully aware – on the basis of direct experience with the Florentine government- that goodness and right are not sufficient to win and maintain political office. Machiavelli thus seeks to learn and teach the rules of political 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.

Machiavelli’s political theory, then, represents a concerted effort to exclude issues of authority and legitimacy from consideration in the discussion of political decision-making and political judgment. Nowhere does this come out more clearly than in his treatment of the relationship between law and force. Machiavelli acknowledges that good laws and good arms constitute the dual foundation of a well-ordered political system. But he immediately adds that since coercion creates legality, he will concentrate his attention on force. He says, “since there cannot be good laws without good arms, I will not consider laws but speak of arms” (*The Prince*, 47). In other words, 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” (*The Prince*, 62). As a result, Machiavelli cannot really be said to have a theory of obligation separate from the imposition of power; people obey only because they fear the consequences of not doing so, whether the loss of life or of privileges. And of course, power alone cannot obligate one, as obligation assumes that one cannot meaningfully do otherwise.

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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. Machiavelli's argument in *The Prince* is designed to demonstrate that politics can only coherently be defined in terms of the supremacy of coercive power; authority as a right to command has no independent status. He substantiates this assertion by reference to the observable realities of political affairs and public life as well as by arguments revealing the self-interested nature of all human conduct. 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. The methods for achieving obedience are varied, and depend heavily upon the foresight that the prince exercises. Hence, the successful ruler needs special training. Clear and broad as his vision of politics was, Machiavelli was still in a peculiar sense an Italian of the first quarter of the sixteenth century. Had he written in any other time and place, his conception of politics must have been significantly different (Sabine, 315).

### **The Discourses On Livy: Liberty And Conflict**

Those who have read only *The Prince* will think Machiavelli to be bias and only favourably disposed for despotism. But *The Prince*, although it is the work by which he is mainly known, by no means contains the whole of his political theory Machiavelli himself gives clear warning of this in his opening chapters, when he says. "All the states and Governments, by which men are or ever have been ruled, have been either Republics or Princedoms... Of republics I shall not speak, having elsewhere spoken of them at length. Here I shall treat exclusively of Princedoms" (47). The work to which Machiavelli here refers is the Discourses on the Ten Books of *Titus Livy*.

From the foregoing therefore, while *The Prince* is doubtless the most widely read of his works, the Discourses perhaps most honestly expresses Machiavelli's personal political beliefs and commitments, in particular, his republican sympathies. The Discourses certainly draw upon the same reservoir of language and concepts that fed *The Prince*, but the former treatise leads us to draw conclusions quite different from – many scholars

have said contradictory to – the latter. In particular, across the two works, 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 (*vivere sicuro*), 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 (*vivere libero*), created by the active participation of, and contention between, the nobility and the people. As Quentin Skinner (189-212) argued, liberty forms a value that anchors Machiavelli’s political theory guides his evaluation of the worthiness of different types of regimes. Only in a republic, for which Machiavelli expresses a distinct preference, may this goal be attained.

Machiavelli adopted this position on both pragmatic and principled grounds. During his career as a secretary and diplomat in the Florentine republic, Machiavelli came to acquire vast experience of the innerworkings of French government, which became his model for the ‘Secure’ (but not free) polity. Although Machiavelli makes relatively little comment about the French monarchy in *The Prince*, he devotes a great deal of attention to France in the Discourses. Why would Machiavelli effusively praise (let alone even analyze) a hereditary monarchy in a work supposedly designed to promote the superiority of republics? The answer stem from Machiavelli’s aim to contrast the best case scenario of a monarchic regime with the institutions and organization of a republic. Even the most excellent monarchy, in Machiavelli’s view, lacks certain salient qualities that are endemic to properly constituted republican government and that make the latter constitution more desirable than the former.

Consequently in the Discourse, “republic are distinguished from principedoms as free states from unfree, and are declared to be superior to the latter both in their essential nature and in many particular advantages” (Foster, 278). But the republic is a form of constitution which not every people is qualified to bear, since a high degree of ‘virtue’ in the people is needed in order to sustain it. In proportion as they lack ‘virtue’, peoples become ‘corrupt’; and a corrupt people (such as Machiavelli held the Italian people of his day to be) must be governed by a prince or a tyrant, because it is not capable of governing itself.

### **On Morality And Politics**

To give us an insight into Machiavelli’s disposition as regards morality in politics, a brief quotation from one of his famous works will be apt here: “The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must learn how not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need” (*The Prince*, 61). This quotation further

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draws our attention to an ancient question: the question of whether political success is compatible with moral goodness, Or, more generally, the question of what the relationship is between politics and morality. Those who generally response to this question – as noted above – fall (roughly) into three categories: optimists, pessimists, and pluralists. Optimists believe that politics and morality can be reconciled. In particular, they believe that the pursuit of political ends will not require the adoption of morally disreputable means. It is in this vain that, Immanuel Kant argues that ‘the tutelary god of morals does not yield to Jupiter (the god of power)... but throws enough light everywhere for us to see what we have to do in order to remain on the path of duty’ (*Perpetual Peace*, 339). And he concludes by saying one cannot compromise here and devise something intermediate, a pragmatically conditioned right (a cross between right and expediency); instead all politics must bend its knee before right, but in return it can hope to reach, though slowly, the level where it will shine unfailingly’ (*Perpetual Peace*, 347). For Kant, honesty is not simply the best policy; it is better than any policy, and this is as true for politicians as for anyone else.

Pessimists, by contrast, fear that politics is incompatible with moral goodness and requires a willingness to engage in morally disreputable acts. Thus Bernard Williams remarks that ‘it is a predictable and probable hazard of public life that there will be situations in which something morally disagreeable is clearly required. To refuse on moral grounds ever to do anything of that sort is more than likely to mean that one cannot pursue even the moral ends of politics’ (62). And in similar vein, Michael Walzer simply notes the conventional wisdom that politicians are ‘a good deal worse (morally worse) than the rest of us’, and concludes that it is not possible to govern innocently. So, optimists hold that morality and politics can be reconciled – the pursuit of political ends will not (normally) require the adoption of morally disreputable means, while pessimists hold that they cannot be reconciled and that the politician must always be willing to at least consider doing what is morally wrong on pain of becoming politically ineffective.

However, the concern of this paper is not with either the optimists or the pessimists, but with the pluralists, and we take our cue from Isaiah Berlin’s famous article ‘The Question of Machiavelli’. Here Berlin notes the discomfort caused through the ages by Machiavelli’s analysis of politics, and urges that only a strongly pluralist understanding of his work can explain this discomfort. He write:

Few would deny that Machiavelli’s writings have scandalized mankind more deeply and continuously than any other political treatise. The reason for this... is not the discovery that politics is the play of power – that political relationships between and within independent communities involve the use of force and fraud, and are unrelated to the principles expressed by the player. That knowledge is as old as conscious thought about politics – certainly as old as Thucydides and Plato. ... The proposition that crime can pay is nothing new in Western historiography. (231).

Rather, what is discomfiting – and indeed terrifying – about Machiavelli is his claim that the political world is itself a world of value. What we find in his writings is not a contrast between the moral world, and another, amoral or immoral world – the world of politics. Rather, we find two worlds of value – the world of (Christian) morality and the world of politics. Each (of these worlds), has much, indeed everything, to be said for it; but they are two and not one. One must learn to choose between them and, having chosen, not look back. On this account, then, what is about the politician is that he subscribes to values which are at odds with the values of Christian morality but which are, nonetheless, ultimate. Moreover, if Machiavelli is right in this contention then:

His cardinal achievement is the uncovering of an insoluble dilemma, the planting of a permanent question mark in the path of posterity. It stems from his de facto recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a result of abnormality or accident or error – the clash of Antigone and Creon or in the story of Tristan – but ... as part of the normal human situation. (Berlin, 232).

For Machiavelli, political ambition is itself a form of morality, albeit a sometimes terrifying form of morality.

## CONCLUSION

Certain chapters of *The Prince* contain the essence of Machiavelli's thought in the sense that they exhibit most strongly his view that political action cannot be kept within the limit of morality. Although he indicated that amoral action might frequently be the most effective measure which can be taken in any situation, he never showed a preference for amoral actions over moral actions. He was not a conscious advocate of evil; he did not want to upset all moral values. But it is equally misleading to maintain the opposite: that Machiavelli wanted to replace Christian morality by another morality and that he encouraged politicians to disregard customary morality because their motives for acting ought to be the good of the political society which represented the highest ethical value.

As Ozumba rightly opined, "*The Prince* is derided as having bad reputation majorly out of tradition because; this book is more often cited than read"(103). In line with this view then our paper strongly holds that *The Prince* is neither a moral nor an immoral book: it is simply a technical book. In a technical book we do not seek for rules of ethical conduct, of good and evil. It is enough if we are told what is useful and useless. Every word in *The Prince* must be read and interpreted in this way. The book contains no moral precepts for the ruler nor does it invite him to commit crimes and villainies. It is especially concerned with and destined for the 'new principalities.' It



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tries to give them all the advice necessary for protecting themselves from all danger.

Finally, in his political theory, Machiavelli sought to distinguish the realm of what ought to be and the realm of what is. He rejected the first for the second. But there is a third realm: the realm of what can be. It is in that realm that what one might call a humanist realism can lie. The measure of man is his ability to extend this sphere of the socially possible. We can start with our democratic values, and we can start also with Machiavelli's realism about tough minded methods. The choice is certainly ours to make based on the expediency of the circumstance at hand. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, the one and only military president Nigeria ever had, made use of some, if not all the recommendations of Machiavelli and he had the longest and most eventful reign as an unelected ruler of this country. Our only counsel therefore is that the value of *The Prince* is more appreciated by those who are honestly concerned with evil in modern societies. It should be read by those who will turn its negative counsels to tools for a more glorious government. It should never be allowed into the hands of wicked men lest it makes them worse and lead them to apply Machiavellianism in situations where there is no need for it.

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