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## The Personal and Political Implications of Machiavelli's The Prince

### Abstract

Machiavelli is praised for the political implications of his writing in *The Prince*. However, many do not see the personal implications of Machiavelli's work, because the motivations for action are spoken in terms of political domination and the acquisition of power. There are underlying principles that speak of domination not only of cities and nations, but the domination of the opportunities placed before each individual. *The Prince* can be read in a different manner; as a manual for daily life and the maximization of opportunity.

Laura McRoberts

**Machiavelli: Personal and Political Implications**

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“And since it is Fortune that does everything, it is she who wishes us to leave her alone, to be quiet and not give her trouble, and wait until she allows us to act again; then you will do well to strive harder, to observe things more closely...” (67)\* *Letter to Francesco Vettori in Rome December 10, 1513*

Machiavelli is praised for the political implications of his writing in *The Prince*. However, many do not see the personal implications of Machiavelli's work, because the motivations for action are spoken in terms of political domination and the acquisition of power. There are underlying principles that speak of domination not only of cities and nations, but the domination of the opportunities placed before each individual. *The Prince* can be read in a different manner; as a manual for daily life and the maximization of opportunity. The mere notion that Machiavelli, a former servant to a Republican government who praises the role of principality, exemplifies his belief that adversity can be a blessing that has not been considered or planned. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli devotes special attention to the lives of Cesare Borgia and Pope Julius II; men who turned even the most trying circumstances into an opportunity to advance. With careful analysis of *The Prince*, from the perspective of personal actions, certain fundamental principles for living are revealed by Machiavelli.

The most prominent theme which Machiavelli introduces, and it is the basis upon which he praises Pope Julius II and Cesare Borgia, is to create opportunity where none seems apparent. The first step to achieving the greatness of Borgia and Pope Julius II is to utilize foresight. Princes, according to Machiavelli, “have not only to watch out for present problems, but also for those in the future, and try diligently to avoid them” (84). Machiavelli analogizes Fortune to a river, a contemplative force that directs its path through

weakness “where she knows that dikes and embankments are not constructed to hold her” (159). Because of this nature, a person who wants to dominate the circumstances instead of being ruled by them must look to see where the river has gone and predict where it will go next. This requires ceaseless planning with little rest, because rest develops into weakness and laziness. Machiavelli states that men who are separated from the rest of those who have ruled in terms of greatness, never “enjoyed the benefits of the time, but

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\*All page references are to *The Portable Machiavelli*, ed. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

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they enjoyed instead benefits of their strength and prudence; for time brings with it all things and it can bring with it the good as well as the bad and the bad as well as the good" (85). Consequently, it does not matter *what* Fortune brings; what matters is that the receiver of this Fate is prepared for any possible scenario. Notably, the skill to "diagnose the ills when they arise" is not universal, and is given to only a few men.

However, it requires more than just the rare skill of recognizing the path of Fortune. To be a truly notable ruler, or human being in general, one must go beyond recognizing and preparing a plan to actually taking action. This is the point at which Pope Julius II and Cesare Borgia are praised by Machiavelli. Pope Julius entered his rule at a time when "the temporal powers of the Pope were little respected in Italy" (114). However, he changed that scenario because he found the Church to be a source of power and consequently increased that power. Likewise, Cesare Borgia was acclaimed as one who "did everything and used every means that a prudent and skillful man ought to use in order to root himself securely in those states that the arms and fortune of others had granted him" (97). These men were separated among the rest because of their rare ability to see potential in a presently weak situation and then to make those visions a reality.

This skill is not only remarkable because it is rare; it is also remarkable because it is contrary to Machiavelli's very dim perception of human nature. According to Machiavelli, men are "ungrateful, fickle, simulators and deceivers, avoiders of danger, greedy for gain..." (131). Moreover, he states that shortsightedness is part of human nature, which the great princes have overcome and been wise in their use of foresight. Princes who act in consort with their human nature make policies that initially seem good, but disregard "the poison that is underneath" (123). As a result, fine princes must use discretion and act with Fortune in some instances and contrary to Fortune in others. There is strong reliance on this unique instinct in these princes, which allows one to understand how Machiavelli can support principalities when he also believes that men are basically flawed. It is this uncommon ability to translate Fortune and accept some parts and reject others. Overall, it is this keen sense, and not a general sense of goodness or lack of evil natures, that sets the good princes apart from the rest of human kind. Notably, Machiavelli does not believe that all princes are fine, nor does he believe that all fine humans are princes. But, it is easier to analyze the life and actions of one well-known person such as a prince. This is why *The Prince* can be read as a manual for all.

At this juncture, it is necessary to examine this rare ability to combat Fortune and manipulate the circumstances to an advantageous outcome. Machiavelli states that the great princes are those who make every circumstance beneficial, despite the apparent immediate implications.

Without a doubt, princes become great when they overcome difficulties and obstacles that are imposed on them; and therefore Fortune, especially when she wishes to increase the reputation of a new prince, who has a greater need to acquire prestige than a hereditary prince does, creates enemies for him and has them take action against him so that he will have the chance to overcome them and to climb higher up the ladder his enemies have brought him (148).

While it may seem like a cliché, it is essentially the idea of visualizing the glass either half-empty or half-full. Machiavelli is arguing here that obstacles for a new prince are a gift from Fortune so that this new prince may establish prestige. Many would view this situation as one in which a prince is merely struggling his way through a circumstance he was just not prepared for, and trouble was just bound to occur, but Machiavelli takes a much brighter view of Fortune.

The rarity of a human who can predict the course of Fortune, act upon those predictions, and do so without hesitation represents a very high standard for a good ruler. However, Machiavelli seems to suggest that deep down in every human, there is not only the potential to carry out bad behavior, but excellent behavior as well. For example, in his introduction to *The Discourses*, Machiavelli states that his goal for his writing is to encourage people to apply historical context to the decision making of the present and the future. He was writing not because people did not know the history, but because they simply neglected the tools that they already had obtained.

After predicting the path of Fortune, utilizing special instinctive abilities, and creating a plan of action, the next step is to carry out the plan. This, according to Machiavelli may be the most difficult portion of combating Fortune to attain power:

One should bear in mind that there is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to administer than to introduce a new system of things: for he who introduces it has all those who profit from the old system as his enemies, and he has only lukewarm allies in all those who might profit from the new system (94).

What makes this such a challenge and the most common point of defeat is that the Prince is no longer relying on his instincts and the nature of Fortune, but the decisions and actions of his subjects. For without support from the

ruled, there can be no external success. Despite the difficulty of change, it is essential in this process towards power that few achieve. When writing about Alexander VI, Machiavelli states that in order to achieve his desired ends, "he has to disturb the order of things and cause turmoil among these states in order to securely make himself master of a part of them" (95). As if this task were not tedious enough, Machiavelli notes that change comes in waves and "one change always leaves space for the construction of another," which means that a fine ruler must predict not only Fortune, but the course of change, and make provisions for such so that change will not overcome the desired goals (80).

As intimidating and exhausting as this process may seem, Machiavelli does not suggest that a Prince should fear Fortune in any way. In fact, he states that there are only two things a prince should fear: "one, internal, concerning his subjects; the other, external, concerning foreign powers" (123). Fear is a destructive force in Machiavelli's model, because "men do harm out of either fear or hatred" (102). Harm is not part of the planned course for power and its intercession only interferes with this delicate model to the acquisition of power. Fortune is not to be feared, but to be viewed as a blessing. Machiavelli views the struggle to combat Fortune as a refinement process, one which either strengthens or kills--but never weakens.

Finally, if a prince can do all of this and maintain dignity, then he is to be glorified. "Still, it cannot be called skill to kill one's fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion, by these means one can acquire power but not glory" (104). Obviously there is something beyond power that all princes desire. Power is of little, if any, value when no one respects it or remembers it. This is the ultimate attainment of victory over one's human nature and Fortune: the point at which a prince transcends goodness and achieves greatness.

There are many complicated factors that have been revealed through this examination process. Machiavelli sets very high standards that are not for the feeble. But as a result, he draws attention to a very selective breed of rulers who are not only to be honored, but whose lives future generations are to model. All of this ties into the tool of following historical models that Machiavelli refers to in his *Discourses*. In order to follow historical models to better our decision making processes, there must be glorious rulers to follow. Without a standard to judge former rulers and principalities, there cannot be proper assessment of contemporary political decision making and decision makers.

The theme of human nature and its struggle with self-interest is predominant in the literature of classical political thought. Machiavelli's thought is new in that he proposes a novel approach to the theme. While he focuses more on strategy, there is an underlying prerequisite to the acquisition

of power. The transcendence from goodness to greatness, from powerful to glorious, occurs in his thought--as in the thought of Plato and Aristotle--only when men go beyond their physical nature and utilize the gift of contemplation that separates them from the beasts. This is apparent in even the initial phases of the attainment of power and the use of foresight. Human nature, according to Machiavelli, tends to be reactionary, and when man becomes contemplative, he usually becomes greedy. However, a few great princes, those who are guided by the goal of glory, plan sufficiently in order to avoid harm. While the theme that the dominating force of self-interest destroys the hope of just politics is prevalent in classical political thought, Machiavelli expresses the benefits of self-sacrifice on the part of the ruler for the sake of the ruled. Proper planning and contemplation puts a prince, or any person, in a state of considering the ultimate goal of the betterment of the society. As a result, foresight produces good plans; proper planning produces virtuous rule; this produces an internal support structure which prepares the city to combat Fortune. The process continues in the same fashion in internal preparation as it does for external preparation: preparing to face both foreign insurgence and even Fortune. Finally, with the support of the community, change becomes easier to implement, and the core cause of most princes' destruction is weakened. None of this fragile process would occur, however, unless a prince was great enough to utilize his contemplative powers and the unique instinct he has been given to reject reactionary tendencies and prepare for rule.

Thus we see that the writing of *The Prince* moves beyond the realm of the powerful and the political and into the world of the common man, whose virtuous lives make the path of the prince a much smoother one. Moreover, men who appear common can reach the inner sanctum of glory by utilizing the rare instinctive natures given to them. This idea is supported by the author's own self-perception as a commoner who transforms himself nightly by putting on "curial robes" and entering his study (10). While Machiavelli restricts himself to the praise of princes through his writing, he opens the door to making each person's life meaningful through a healthy perspective of trials and the encouragement to be brave against anything that Fortune may bring. For not all men can prepare to conquer the world, but no one need be deprived of the ability to conquer opportunity.