

Niccolò Machiavelli: *The Prince* (1532 CE)

The Way Princes Should Keep Their Word

Machiavelli's treatise on government was rejected with horror by almost all early readers, but it accurately describes the means which rulers have always used to remain in power. As a pioneering study of practical politics it has often been compared with Kautilya's Arthashastra and the doctrines of the Chinese legalists, such as Han Fei Tzu. But what makes The Prince both more revolutionary and more controversial than either of these is the delight Machiavelli seems to take in scorning conventional morality. Indeed so cynical are such passages as the following that some readers have imagined that he must have been satirizing rather than advocating these ideas. His work cannot be said to have had any great impact on the world, but it strikingly marks the end of an era during which writers felt obliged to cloak their recommendations on government in a pious guise: his values are entirely secular. In describing the behavior of the successful politician Machiavelli has in mind a specific model, the ruthless Cesare Borgia (1476-1507).

1. What good qualities does Machiavelli say a prince should seem to have?

Everyone understands how praiseworthy it is for a prince to remain true to his word and to live with complete integrity without any scheming. However, we've seen through experience how many princes in our time have achieved great things who have little cared about keeping their word and have shrewdly known the skill of tricking the minds of men; these princes have overcome those whose actions were founded on honesty and integrity.

It should be understood that there are two types of fighting: one with laws and the other with force. The first is most suitable for men, the second is most suitable for beasts, but it often happens that the first is not enough, which requires that we have recourse to the second. Therefore, it is necessary for a prince to know how to act both as a man and as a beast. This was signified allegorically to princes by the ancient writers: they wrote that Achilles and many other ancient princes were given to be raised and tutored by the centaur Chiron, who took custody of them and disciplined them. This can only mean, this trainer who was half beast and half man, that a prince needs to know how to use either one or the other nature, and the one without the other will never last.

Since it is necessary for the prince to use the ways of beasts, he should imitate the fox and the lion, because the lion cannot defend himself from snares and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. Therefore, it is important to be a fox in order to understand the snares and a lion in order to terrify the wolves. Those who choose only to be a lion do not really understand. Therefore, a prudent leader will not and should not observe his promises, when such observance will work against him and when the reasons for making the promise are no longer valid. If all men were good, this precept would not be good; but since men are evil and will not keep their word with you, you shouldn't keep yours to them. Never has a prince lacked legitimate reasons to break faith. I could give you an infinite number of examples from modern times, and show you numerous peace treaties and promises that have been broken and made completely empty by the faithlessness of princes: these knew well how to use the ways of the fox, and they are the ones who succeed. But it is necessary to know how to hide this nature and to simulate a good character and to dissimulate: for the majority of men are simple and will only follow the needs of the present, so that the deceiver can always find someone he can deceive.

I'm not going to pass up a specific example from recent history. [Alexander VI \(1\)](#) never did or thought about anything else except deceiving people and always found some reason or other to do it. There was never a man who was better at making assurances, or more eager to offer solemn promises, or who kept them less;

yet he always succeeded in his deceptions beyond his wildest dreams, because he played his role in the world so well.

Therefore, a prince doesn't need to have all the qualities mentioned earlier, but it is necessary that he appear to have them. I'll even add to this: having good qualities and always practicing them is harmful, while appearing to practice them is useful. It's good to appear to be pious, faithful, humane, honest, and religious, and it's good to be all those things; but as long as one keeps in mind that when the need arises you can and will change into the opposite. It needs to be understood that a prince, and especially a prince recently installed, cannot observe all those qualities which make men good, and it is often necessary in order to preserve the state to act contrary to faith, contrary to mercy, contrary to humaneness, and contrary to religion. And therefore he needs a spirit disposed to follow wherever the winds of fortune and the variability of affairs leads him. As I said above, it's necessary that he not depart from right but that he follow evil.

A prince must take great care never to let anything come from his mouth that is not full of the above-mentioned five qualities, and he must appear to all who see and hear him to be completely pious, completely faithful, completely honest, completely humane, and completely religious. And nothing is more important than to appear to have that last quality. Men judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because everyone can see but few can feel. Everyone can see how you appear, few can feel what you are, and these few will not dare to oppose the opinion of the multitude when it is defended by the majesty of the state. In actions of all men, especially princes, where there is no recourse to justice, the end is all that counts. A prince should only be concerned with conquering or maintaining a state, for the means will always be judged to be honorable and praiseworthy by each and every person, because the masses always follow appearances and the outcomes of affairs, and the world is nothing other than the masses. The few do not find a place wherever the masses are supported. There is a certain prince of our own time, [\(2\)](#) whom it would not be wise to name, who preaches nothing except peace and faith, and yet is the greatest enemy of both; and if he had observed one or the other, he already would have lost both his reputation and his state many times over.

Translated by Richard Hooker

1 The worldly pope who illegitimately fathered Machiavelli's hero, Cesare Borgia.

2 Ferdinand of Spain.