# MACHIAVELLI, THE IMMORALIST? THINK AGAIN!

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**Abstract.** Human nature is far from being perfect. Such a statement made Niccolò Machiavelli, the philosopher of the Renaissance known for his brand of political realism, claim that it is necessary for a ruler to keep a firm grasp on his/her populace in a way that neither favours them too much nor treats them outright oppressively. In other words, Machiavelli believes that a prudent leader is one who knows how to steer his/her population without the use of too much force while refraining from being too lackadaisical. However, by reading Machiavelli's *The Prince*, one may wonder why the author portrays such a blatant support for ghastly measures like exterminating the family of the house that ruled the state one seeks to conquer, or why it is that a potentate must reside in a newly captured territory, even if the ruler has no heartfelt interests in doing so. Can we argue that because Machiavelli divorces politics from morality, as well as affirms a nasty view of humanity's nature, an amoral, instead of an immoral interpretation of *The Prince* is possible? If we could justify that human nature is at least somewhat abysmal and that politics does not need to be ethical, could this help wash clean the repugnant reading that Machiavelli's *The Prince* invites? Quite simply, this essay will argue that we can and that morals and politics are, in fact, divorceable.

**Keywords:** Machiavelli, *The Prince*, amorality, immorality, political philosophy, Renaissance thought

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The name Machiavelli is synonymous with cruelty, nefariousness, deception and outright violence in the minds of many. However, could we argue for a more amoral interpretation of this Renaissance diplomat, even if we only adhere to his words in what is his most famous, or perhaps infamous, compositions, *The Prince*? It is the purpose of this essay to make such a case if we can justify two main

assertions: that politics is separate from morality, and that the nature of humankind is indeed lacklustre.

## 2. Situating Machiavelli's *The Prince*

*The Prince* was written during a time when its author was not in the most favourable position, career-wise (Nederman 2014, 1-2). Machiavelli was out of a job, for the Medici Family suspected him of subversion and disloyalty against their power over Early 1500's Florence, in present-day Tuscany, Italy (Nederman 2014, 1-2). However, this time off Machiavelli put to good use, and through reflecting on his various political roles throughout his career before the era of Medici-ran Florence, he penned a guide for those in the utmost positions of power (Nederman 2014, 1-2). In this instructional text entitled *The Prince*, Machiavelli divorces politics from morality and declares that because human nature is not at all pristine, it is necessary for a ruler to employ various means, not all being pleasant, to maintain an orderly, well-run, and safe state (Nederman 2014, 5).

## 3. Machiavelli's Schism of Politics and Morality and the Real Human Nature

Firstly, Machiavelli asserts that insincerity, ungratefulness, and timidity plague human nature (Nederman 2014, 2-4). He also claims that when people have the opportunity to gain from breaking bonds with others, and thus become, or reveal their hidden disloyalty, odds are they will (Machiavelli 1979, 108). In other words, he would assert that although we politicize morals or claim that we should act in such a way that our political institutions, beliefs, and treatment of each other reflect lofty ethical ideals like justice, fairness, and equality, our actual political actions tell a different tale. At the same

time, Machiavelli would continue to claim that because we fail to moralize politics or not act in such a way that our political behaviour displays our moral convictions, it is not the case that morality and politics form an inseparable bond.

As such, because human nature is grim or absent of genuine moral worth, especially in the theatre of political life, Machiavelli asserts that a ruler must be crafty or shrewd as a fox, while as dangerous as a lion, to maintain his/her station of power (Machiavelli 1979, 142-143). To do so, he first recommends that a leader must have the most martial might or armed formidability in his/her state to display the ferocity of a lion when necessary (Machiavelli 1979, 124, 142-143). At the same time, it is through statecraft, such as forming smart alliances, with minor powers, to thwart the plans of stronger states and by maintaining buffer zones between one's dominion and the territory of other nations, that a leader can display the cunning of a fox (Machiavelli 1979, 81-82, 142-143).

In this same vein, we may also assert that Machiavelli's famed recommendation that it is safer for a ruler to cultivate fear, rather than love, assists in further revealing Machiavelli's views on the essence of humanity (Machiavelli 1979, 130-133). Now, to Machiavelli, because a ruler must arouse fear or demand obedience from others, we may continue to assert that he was well aware of gainsayers, conspirators, and those who seek to either topple the mantle of a leader's authority, or benefit from using a ruler, to solely fulfil their desires (Machiavelli 1979, 130-133, 154-157). Consequently, because people are chiefly out for themselves, and since they may see a kind, loving, or authentically upright leader as someone who would be easy to take advantage of, Machiavelli believes it is most secure, politically savvy, and politically wise, or characteristic of a virtuosic sovereign to inspire a healthy amount of dread in others (Machiavelli 1979, 130-133). Finally, we may claim that because people are far from angelic, it is only necessary for a potentate to employ fear as a method of ensuring control over

people, for, in Machiavelli's view, individuals are justifiably a sorry lot (Machiavelli 1979, 130-133).

At the same time, we also see Machiavelli asserting that not even a leader is entirely trustable, for excessive cruelty and evil deeds on the part of a ruler, are, at times, commonplaces, and such tyrannical rules are remediable by a populace bearing arms (Nederman 2014, 3-4). Irrespective of this, Machiavelli was sincere when he asserted that a leader must allow for an armed populace, it is nonetheless the case that he does make this assertion. Resultingly, we may adhere to the view that because Machiavelli believes that an armed populace is necessary for the functioning of a state, we may tie this notion back to his understanding of human nature as being, in part, abhorrible (Nederman 2014, 3-4). For, in utopic conditions, no one needs bearing weaponry to ensure their safety from one another or the state. Lastly, these Machiavellian provisos to help resolve the lack of complete trust between ruler and subject and subject and ruler assists him to confirm that the purity of human nature is indeed something he seeks to at least cast into doubt.

## 4. Political *Virtù* is Not Moral Virtue

From these considerations above, we may assert that Machiavelli unpacks two central claims in *The Prince*. First, that it is of human nature to be, at times, less than wanting and, secondly, that because of this, we may surely claim that politics and morality are not inseparable. Let us now explore what Machiavelli means by political *virtù*, and why it is not equivalent to moral virtue.

To Machiavelli, political *virtù* is that ability on the part of leaders at the apex of positions of power to acquire more power and secure their stations in such a way that it is necessary or undoubtingly safe (Machiavelli 1979, 80-81, 108, 124). One display of political *virtù* that he draws his readers to in *The Prince* deals with which troops, or soldiery, are most beneficial to a ruler (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120).

He begins by describing three types of soldiers: citizen-soldiers, mercenaries, and auxiliary troops (Machiavelli 1979, 115-124). The first, citizen-soldiers, or well-trained militias, are those troops that come from, live, and have their livelihoods invested in the state (Machiavelli 1979, 115-116, 124). As such, the author believes that a leader possesses the most control over these soldiers for without their leader these armed forces have the most to lose (Machiavelli 1979, 120-122). Accordingly, it is these troops that would be most willing to die for their leader and nation, for they seek valour through courage so that their ruler may reward them upon return for being successful in battle (Machiavelli 1979, 120-122). To Machiavelli, it would be wise of a leader, or demonstrative of his/her political *virtù*, to indeed grant titles, land, and praise on these soldiers, for it further solidifies that sovereign's grip on what is arguably his/her greatest asset military might (Machiavelli 1979, 115-116, 120-122). Hence, whether or not these soldiers wage war morally, it is necessary for a leader to take care of them and to hold them in high esteem, for the safety of his/her reign, as well as the safety of his/her populace, depends, in part, on them (Machiavelli 1979, 120-124).

Next, Machiavelli talks of mercenary and auxiliary troops which he recommends against, entirely (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120, 120-124). That is, to Machiavelli, it is best to avoid the use of these soldiers for a few main reasons. First, mercenary troops and auxiliary, or rented soldiers from another state, are, ultimately, disloyal; they seek to gain from the highest bidder as in the case of the former soldiery, and they have no real stake in the country that uses them as in the case of the latter soldiery (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120, 120-124). Hence, we may claim that both forms of warriors lack genuine concern for their hirer's state, for they have no real stake in the well-being of their hirer's dominion (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120, 120-124). Accordingly, we may assert that both mercenaries and auxiliaries pose a danger to their hirer's or renter's sovereignty and territories, for it is not the case that either is or could

be, entirely under the thumb, so to speak, of their client, that leader who employs them (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120, 120-124). That is because mercenaries and auxiliaries could cause great havoc in their employer's nation if that leader refuses to pay mercenaries more money for their service and if he must wage war with the home nation of the auxiliary troops (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120, 120-124). As such, it is only politically wise or displaying of political *virtù* if a leader refuses to use these types of soldiers, regardless if it is morally right to use them (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120, 120-124). That is, regardless if mercenaries, who usually disregard the standards or protocol of war, and irrespective if auxiliaries are convenient to use, it is not a moral concern as to why a leader should never employ them; instead it is a safety concern (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120, 120-124). Consequently, ethical deliberations should be void in consideration of using such soldiers, preferably it is never advisable to do so, for they pose too much of a threat to a leader and his/her state if that leader chooses to hire or rent them (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120, 120-124).

Another example of political *virtù* that Machiavelli recommends is the practice of a leader having to reside in his/her newly acquired lands, to cement loyalty in that newly held state, to thwart any plans of rebellion or revolt (Machiavelli 1979, 79, 91-92). First, Machiavelli gives this advice mainly to leaders who recently assumed control over a territory that was once independent of his/her state (Machiavelli 1979, 91-92). Now, to soothe, or ease the shift of power from one ruling house to a new ruling house, Machiavelli calls for the execution of the family that once held control over a leader's newly acquired domain (Machiavelli 1979, 91-92). This is an example of political *virtù*, for it is most prudent of a leader, especially in a land that does not hold the same customs or traditions as that ruler's nation, to clear the way for his/her recently established authority, by exterminating any old remnants of power that may challenge that sovereign's supremacy (Machiavelli 1979, 91-92). At the same time, this is far from being morally correct, for killing

because one must establish his/her authority in an unchallengeable way, hardly provides a genuine ethical reason to kill.

However, in a sense, we may claim that Machiavelli would view this move on the part of a leader as being a form of self-defence (Machiavelli 1979, 91-92). As such, there is more wiggle room, so to speak, to argue that slaying an enemy family, pre-emptively, may prevent future harm to a leader who recently came to own that enemy clan's former nation (Machiavelli 1979, 91-92). We may interpret the vanquishing of an enemy clan as a precautionary move on the part of a keen leader who wants to solidify power in his/her new lands fully (Machiavelli 1979, 91-92). Thus, although it may not sound morally correct, or ethically right, to partake in such astonishingly drastic measures, like executions, it is indeed in the mind of Machiavelli best, or most necessary to do so, to keep power, and thus displaying political *virtù*.

Moreover, Machiavelli also draws his readers as to why it is that refraining from raising taxes as well as refusing to change the laws of a newly conquered nation, demonstrates a leader's political *virtù*, which does not arise from a moral concern for that newly acquired populace (Machiavelli 1979, 136-137). To Machiavelli, by keeping order in a state, such that a people remain used to how to go about following their day-to-day lives in a way that they recognize the rules, laws, or codes of conduct expected of them by their government, is a wise move on the part of a new ruler (Machiavelli 1979, 136-137). That is because the more a leader gives less of a reason for a people to try to topple his/her authority, the more that leader will be able to reap the benefits of controlling that state, such as gaining from its economic resources (Machiavelli 1979, 136-137). Accordingly, it is not because a leader cares for the people that they refuse to alter the laws of that state; instead, it is because it makes it more simple, easy, and beneficial for a ruler to do so (Machiavelli 1979, 136-137). Thus, again, we see that political *virtù* is not a moral virtue, because it does not emerge from purely ethical considerations.

## 5. Arguing for an Amoral Interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince*

From these notions above, we may now begin to piece together how it is that an amoralist interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* is producible, as well as why it is more faithful to the spirit of that text to do so.

Since politics and morality are divisible, or that it is that the experience of political life is drastically eviler than what people imagine or take politics to be, the view that politics is a means to a better life of peace, happiness, and prosperity for all, Machiavelli would claim, is not the purpose of *The Prince*. That is because Machiavelli, as the author behind *The Prince*, endorses the view that a leader must act in a way that is necessary, or fitting of the social and political climate of the times, and not according to any moral standard (Machiavelli 1979, 135). To Machiavelli, this is due to the fact that people come in various degrees; there are those who will support a leader and those who will betray a leader, and consequently, sovereigns must have an array of techniques to choose from, to quell insurrections and/or pacify those who seek too much from them (Machiavelli 1979, 133-136).

This opens the field to interpret Machiavelli as more of an amoralist than an immoralist, for there is no evidence to suggest that Machiavelli would not believe it politically savvy or an excellent display of political *virtù*, to reward those who help to solidify a ruler's rule, although never overwhelmingly (Machiavelli 1979, 128-130). As such, it is more accurate to claim that Machiavelli believes that in the field of politics what is right is always a form of might, or a display on the part of a ruler to be the best at all that is doable in his/her state (Machiavelli 1979, 128-130). In other words, if a populace requires correcting, a leader could employ means that may appear cruel, but never in unhealthy doses, and if soldiers are victorious in battle, a potentate may bestow greater power on them,

but never in a way that may lead to his/her downfall (Machiavelli 1979, 136-146).

Thus, *The Prince* is more appropriately a work of strategy in statecraft than an immoral work sanctioning inexplicable measures taken by a leader, to merely decimate his/her lands and people or foolishly wage war, to cement his/her demise (Machiavelli 1979, 80-81, 136-146). These actions are moronic, and it is evident from Machiavelli's recommendations that a new leader must refrain from them, as well as refrain from raising the taxes, and customs, or laws of a foreign nation that is recently under the mantle of that ruler (Machiavelli 1979, 80-81, 136-146). Also, it is evident from Machiavelli's advice that a leader should reside in a newly taken state, to solidify loyalty, and to not be too heavy-handed with a new populace (Machiavelli 1979, 80-82). Furthermore, not partaking in extreme decisions is evident in Machiavelli's analysis as to why mercenary and auxiliary forces are never wise for a leader to use, and also why it is that cruel, unusual, and senseless violence should never be a hobby of a ruler (Machiavelli 1979, 115-124, 103-104, 136-146). Thus, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is instead a consistent text insofar as believing that one must meet tradition with tradition and legality with legality, as well as proximity to a people, to closely monitor them when one is a new ruler, as well as cultivating a level-hand when dealing with various types of subjects (Machiavelli 1979, 80-81). Lastly, this consistency even extends to the warriors a sovereign must use, to wage warfare properly, or to fight battles with fighters who stand to gain or lose from war, depending on if they win or not (Machiavelli 1979, 115-120).

Because different circumstances demand different types of behaviour on behalf of a leader, Machiavelli also draws his readers to the concept of fortune, or what he calls *fortuna* (Machiavelli 1979, 133-136). *Fortuna*, to Machiavelli, encapsulates or involves those situations that call for action that a ruler must take so that he/she may continue to hold and secure his/her reign within his/her state (Machiavelli 1979, 133-136). Accordingly, since fortune, or *fortuna*,

is not always lovely or beneficial to a leader, Machiavelli believes, is further reason to embrace an amoral stance when considering which decisions and conduct a ruler must apply and display (Machiavelli 1979, 133-136). That is because when fortunes turn for the worse, a leader must employ more severe measures to ease that turmoil, in such a way that displays not only that ruler's political *virtù* but also that that leader will stop at nothing to maintain what he/she possesses and the people he/she leads (Machiavelli 1979, 96-99, 133-136). Regardless if it is ethical or moral in the colloquial sense of those words. As such, when luck runs out, or when good *fortuna* is absent, we may assert that there is little space for error, and as such, it becomes more of a matter of using political *virtù* than fulfilling a leader's or his/her people's wants, than a time which necessarily requires benevolence (Machiavelli 1979, 96-99, 133-136). Thus, we may claim that an amoral reading of *The Prince* is more appropriate than looking for what may seem to be its immoral elements, for times change, fortunes wane and fade, and instead, acting by political necessity is, to Machiavelli, paramount for a ruler to always keep in mind.

Finally, we may close this section by recapping what Machiavelli asserts regarding what is right or wrong in the political arena of official life. That is, a ruler must conjure the strength to be mighty, or as ferocious as a lion, to subordinate individuals to behave in a way that is in step with the demands of that leader (Machiavelli 1979, 133-136). A leader must also be as cunning as a fox, or level-headed, especially when situations go awry, so that that leader may secure his/her station, in such a way that adversaries within and exterior to his/her state, will fail to succeed at stomping or trampling, that potentate's control over his/her government and people (Machiavelli 1979, 133-136). Accordingly, by doing away with what we usually understand by moral or ethical behaviour, Machiavelli would assert that we clear the way to deal with people, as they are, and not as they should be. Finally, by doing so, or treating people as they behave, we can see how it is that the common, but mistaken,

idea of the link between politics and morality is divorceable. Thus, politics by being separate from morals is indeed a field that calls for a specific form of integrity, which is the skill of a leader who will not fail to do whatever it takes, to hold and acquire power (Machiavelli 1979, 80-81, 133-136).

## 6. Conclusion

It was the intention of this piece to draw readers to a more amoralist interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, by explicating why a proper reading of this work must include adhering to the view that Machiavelli believed morals and politics to be separate fields of inquiry. Now, to accomplish justifying this divide between ethics and politics, this piece focused readers on why it is that the conduct of people proves them to be far less than pure. Appropriately, it only fits that *The Prince* looks for other solutions than those provided by moralists or ethicists, to handle the reality of human wickedness, properly. Lastly, these two conditions, that politics is divisible from morals, and that human nature is far from innocent, helps to reveal a more level-headed, balanced, and genuine interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, that is fairer to its writer's intentions.

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