

MIT All-Schol Read: *The Prince* by Nicolo Machiavelli (1515)

Topics for Discussion:

1. Machiavelli's adage, "The ends justify the means," is justly famous. Yet he does not say simply that the means that are instrumental to a good end are just--on the contrary, he says that they are often unjust, that a wise administrator "must learn how not to be good". Is this a coherent notion? If something is justified by the good that it produces, why not speak of it as good?
2. Machiavelli's name became synonymous in the Renaissance with evil advice and practice, largely on the basis of this document. To be "Machiavellian" came to mean to be a sly schemer, one who hides his evil intentions behind the mask of executive necessity. Did he deserve this reputation? Is the maxim "the ends justify the means" only a cover for the notion that the real end and aim of the means is simply the means themselves--that is to say, the exercise of power.
3. What does it mean to advise the Prince that he must "learn how not to be good"? In what way is "learning" involved? Machiavelli advises the ruler to be both beast and human being. Is this like wearing two hats, one for the office and another for home? Can you put on and take off the hat of a beast at will? Machiavelli indicates pretty clearly that you must never seem to take off the religious hat--i.e. that the religious necessity is uncompromising and therefore you must always secretly wear your princely hat under the religious one. If there is some compromise possible, for us, which will be subordinate to which?
4. Machiavelli reserves special praise for Hannibal, whose "inhuman cruelty, together with his infinite other virtues, made him always venerated and terrible in the sight of his soldiers." No doubt in Hannibal's day, and perhaps in Machiavelli's too, the nature of armies made fear of swift and terrible punishment an emotion that a commander-in-chief had to cultivate. It may seem that Hannibal, the army commander, is not a fit model for heads of state. But Machiavelli's advice was intended for rulers in times of peace as well as war and concerned the nature of command, which has always to deal with the image that the ruler must project if he (or she--but that possibility never occurred to Machiavelli) is to be effective both within the state and without. Indeed, you might sum up Machiavelli's teaching as follows: "Never mind reality, the image is everything". Is this wrongheaded advice?

MIT All-School Read: Machiavelli's *The Prince* Essay Assignments

1. Machiavelli says that people will continue to trust someone who breaks his word because (a) you can always give good reasons for breaking your word; (b) people are “so ready to obey present necessities” that they allow themselves to be deceived. What is meant by “present necessities”? (Don’t just say; give reasons for your interpretation, in the light of your understanding of the text.) Is the notion of “allowing yourself to be deceived” a coherent notion? Explain, and in doing so, elucidate what Machiavelli had in mind in the light of his whole argument.
2. Why do people need the illusion, if not the reality, of the five qualities the appearance of which Machiavelli says that the prince must cultivate: merciful, sincere (keeping your word), humane (compassionate), forthright (openness about your intentions, i.e., without a hidden agenda), religious? (NB: the qualities differ slightly, depending upon what translation you read.) Machiavelli does not give reasons but he comments often upon “what most people are like”. Do any of these comments explain the matter? Machiavelli did not publish *The Prince* but circulated it in a semi-public way, and there is ample indication that he meant it for such general publication. If the prince is supposed to cultivate the illusion of possessing these qualities, doesn’t blabbing the need for this rather give the game away?
3. Machiavelli’s adage, “The ends justify the means,” is justly famous, although he evidently did not say this (or, rather, its Italian equivalent) precisely. What he did say was that the motives behind anyone’s actions are hard to know and that this is especially the case with the actions of princes, who can’t be observed by their subjects at close hand; hence, in the case of princes, actions are usually judged by their results. Despite the inaccuracy, however, the attribution of the phrase “the ends justify the means” to Machiavelli has stuck (our translation, which dates from two centuries back, uses it), and the reason is, evidently, that the phrase suits the spirit of Machiavelli’s argument. Comment on this. Further, you might consider whether there is a possible contradiction implied by the phrase: if the ends justify the means, what sense does it make to say that the Prince has to learn how “not to be good”. If the means are necessary for a good end aren’t they, therefore, good?
4. In this connection, what does it mean to advise a chief executive that he must “learn how not to be good”? In what way is “learning” involved? Machiavelli advises the ruler to be both beast and human being. Is this like wearing two hats, one for the office and another for home? Can you put on and take off the hat of a beast at will?
5. Machiavelli introduces a radical split between the advice that he will give and the advice found in books, which (he says) is suitable only for imagined republics and principalities, “for there is such a gap between how one lives and how one ought to live that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.” Would More disagree with this judgment? *The Prince* was written for those who rule territories that they did not inherit; Utopia was such a territory, conquered by King Utopos. What would More have said of Machiavelli’s book, could he have read it? More appears in his own book, offering judgment about Raphael’s praise of Utopian institutions at the end of part two. Do you think that this expressed his genuine opinions? If so, what’s the point of writing the book?