

# Study Guide on Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*

What does Machiavelli seem to see as the end or objective of political rule? Does he propose it as a good common to the people or proper to the prince? If the latter, is this good opposed to or conducive to the good of the subjects? Consider, for example:

- “So let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone” (71<sup>1</sup>).
- At the end of Chapter XXI, the prince is instructed to love the virtues and virtuous men, honor the arts, provide festivals and spectacles, meet with smaller communities, *etc.* How do these things relate to his proposed goal for the prince?

What does Machiavelli mean by *virtue*? How does this compare with moral virtue as traditionally understood? How does his use of the word relate to the end he is proposing for the prince?

- Consider how Machiavelli calls on the prince sometimes to perform bad deeds. In what circumstances does he advise this?
  - “Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity” (61).
  - “Thus, it is not necessary for a prince to have all the above-mentioned qualities in fact, but it is indeed necessary to appear to have them . . .” (70).
  - “[A new prince] is often under a necessity, to maintain his state, of acting against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion” (70).
- For what reason does Machiavelli advise the practice of evil?
  - “[I]t would be a very praiseworthy thing to find in a prince all of the above-mentioned qualities that are held good. But because he cannot have them, nor wholly observe them, since human conditions do not permit it . . .” (62).
- How do these considerations fit with his statements about morality in other places:

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<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- “Yet one cannot call it virtue to kill one’s citizens, betray one’s friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory” (35).
- “[Agathocles’] savage cruelty and inhumanity, together with his infinite crimes, do not permit him to be celebrated among the most excellent men. Thus, one cannot attribute to fortune or to virtue what he achieved without either” (35).

“Having discussed in detail all the characteristics of the principalities I listed to start with, and having to some extent considered the reasons why they prosper or fail, and shown the methods often used to acquire or retain them . . .” (38). Review Machiavelli’s accomplishments to this point.

- Why do principalities prosper or fail, according to Machiavelli?
- How are they acquired and retained?

In Chapter VI, Machiavelli offers Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus as examples of great founders. What does he see in them that is exemplary? What should be imitated by the aspiring prince?

“Therefore it is necessary for a prince to know well how to use the beast and the man. . . . To have as teacher a half-beast, half-man means nothing other than that a prince needs to know how to use both natures” (69). Explain what Machiavelli means in proposing the lion and the fox as models for princes. What princely quality does each animal exemplify? What are the implications of holding up these animals as models for rulers? (See esp. Chapter XVIII.)

What is meant by “freedom” in this text? Is it something that makes men happy, in Machiavelli’s understanding?

What does Machiavelli understand by *fortune*? What role does it play in politics—does it determine anything certainly? How should a prince act with respect to fortune?

- Consider: “I judge that it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern” (98).
- “It is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down” (101).



- Consider also the references to fortune on pages 6, 23, 57, 85, and 102.

How does Machiavelli view human nature? Are people capable of living virtuously, or not? Is the people's corruptness the reason why the prince must be willing to commit these crimes?

- "For this has to be noted: that men should either be caressed or eliminated, because they avenge themselves for slight offenses but cannot do so for grave ones; so the offense one does to a man should be such that one does not fear revenge for it" (10–11).
- "For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good" (61).
- "And if all men were good, this teaching would not be good; but because they are wicked and do not observe faith with you, you also do not have to observe it with them" (69).

Given his method and premise, does his overall analysis of politics seem wise? Would a prince who followed Machiavelli's instructions achieve the goals Machiavelli sets?

How does Machiavelli view his own project? Does this treatise mark a new kind of "political science"? If so, what distinguishes it from older considerations of politics? Consider his analysis and methodology:

- "But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it . . ." (61).
- "Thus, leaving out what is imagined about a prince and discussing what is true . . ." (61).

Why did Machiavelli write *The Prince* and dedicate it to Lorenzo de' Medici? Did he intend to create a treatise universal in application, or did he write for one man at a certain time to accomplish a specific goal? How do both the dedicatory letter and the last chapter (XXVI) fit in with the rest of the work? Consider:

- "[Your Magnificence] will learn from [this work] my extreme desire that you arrive at the greatness that fortune and your other qualities promise you" (4).



- “[T]hinking to myself . . . whether there is matter to give opportunity to someone prudent and virtuous to introduce a form that would bring honor to him and good to the community of men there” (102).
- “So, left as if lifeless, [Italy] awaits whoever it can be that will heal her wounds . . .” (102) and “This barbarian domination stinks to everyone” (105).

**Suggested use:** This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

