

Niccolo Machiavelli

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1. Biography

Relatively little is known for certain about Machiavelli's early life in comparison with many important figures of the Italian Renaissance (the following section draws on Grazia 1989 and Viroli 2000). He was born 3 May 1469 in Florence and at a young age became a pupil of a renowned Latin teacher, Paolo da Ronciglione. It is speculated that he attended the University of Florence, and even a cursory glance at his corpus reveals that he received an excellent humanist education. It is only with his entrance into public view, with his appointment as the Second Chancellor of the Republic of Florence, however, that we begin to acquire a full and accurate picture of his life. For the next fourteen years, Machiavelli engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity on behalf of Florence, travelling to the major centers of Italy as well as to the royal court of France and to the imperial curia of Maximilian. We have letters, dispatches, and occasional writings that testify to his political assignments as well as to his acute talent for the analysis of personalities and institutions.

Florence had been under a republican government since 1484, when the leading Medici family and its supporters had been driven from power. During this time, Machiavelli thrived under the patronage of the Florentine *gonfaloniere* (or chief administrator for life), Piero Soderini. In 1512, however, with the assistance of Spanish troops, the Medici defeated the republic's armed forces and dissolved the government. Machiavelli was a direct victim of the regime change: he was initially placed in a form of internal exile and, when he was (wrongly) suspected of conspiring against the Medici in 1513, he was imprisoned and tortured for several weeks. His retirement thereafter to his farm outside of Florence afforded the occasion and the impetus for him to turn to literary pursuits.

The first of his writings in a more reflective vein was also ultimately the one most commonly associated with his name, *The Prince*. Written at the end of 1513 (and perhaps early 1514), but only formally published posthumously in 1532, *The Prince* was composed in great haste by an author who was, among other things, seeking to regain his status in the Florentine government. (Many of his colleagues in the republican government were quickly rehabilitated and returned to service under the Medici.) Originally written for presentation to Giuliano de' Medici (who may well have appreciated it), the dedication was changed, upon Giuliano's death, to Lorenzo de' Medici, who almost certainly did not read it when it came into his hands in 1516.

Meanwhile, Machiavelli's enforced retirement led him to other literary activities. He wrote verse, plays, and short prose, penned a study of *The Art of War* (published in 1521), and produced biographical and historical sketches. Most importantly, he composed his other major contribution to political thought, the *Discourses on the Ten Books of Titus Livy*, an exposition of the principles of republican rule masquerading as a commentary on the work of the famous historian of the Roman Republic. Unlike *The Prince*, the *Discourses* was authored over a long period of time (commencing perhaps in 1514 or 1515 and completed in 1518 or 1519, although again only published posthumously in 1531). The book may have been shaped by informal discussions attended by Machiavelli among some of the leading Florentine intellectual and political figures under the sponsorship of Cosimo Rucellai.

Near the end of his life, and probably as a result of the aid of well-connected friends whom he never stopped badgering for intervention, Machiavelli began to return to the favor of the Medici family. In 1520, he was commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici to compose a *History of Florence*, an assignment completed in 1525 and presented to the Cardinal, who had since ascended the papal throne

as Clement VII, in Rome. Other small tasks were forthcoming from the Medici government, but before he could achieve a full rehabilitation, he died on 21 June 1527.

2. *The Prince*: Analyzing Power

It has been a common view among political philosophers that there exists a special relationship between moral goodness and legitimate authority. Many authors (especially those who composed mirror-of-princes books or royal advice books during the Middle Ages and Renaissance) believed that the use of political power was only rightful if it was exercised by a ruler whose personal moral character was strictly virtuous. Thus rulers were counseled that if they wanted to succeed—that is, if they desired a long and peaceful reign and aimed to pass their office down to their offspring—they must be sure to behave in accordance with conventional standards of ethical goodness. In a sense, it was thought that rulers did well when they did good; they earned the right to be obeyed and respected inasmuch as they showed themselves to be virtuous and morally upright.

It is precisely this moralistic view of authority that Machiavelli criticizes at length in his best-known treatise, *The Prince*. For Machiavelli, there is no moral basis on which to judge the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power. Rather, authority and power are essentially coequal: whoever has power has the right to command; but goodness does not ensure power and the good person has no more authority by virtue of being good. Thus, in direct opposition to a moralistic theory of politics, Machiavelli says that the only real concern of the political ruler is the acquisition and maintenance of power (although he talks less about power *per se* than about “maintaining the state.”) In this sense, Machiavelli presents a trenchant criticism of the concept of authority by arguing that the notion of legitimate rights of rulership adds nothing to the actual possession of power. *The Prince* purports to reflect the self-conscious political realism of an author who is fully aware—on the basis of direct experience with the Florentine government—that goodness and right are not sufficient to win and maintain political office. Machiavelli thus seeks to learn and teach the rules of political power. For Machiavelli, power characteristically defines political activity, and hence it is necessary for any successful ruler to know how power is to be used. Only by means of the proper application of power, Machiavelli believes, can individuals be brought to obey and will the ruler be able to maintain the state in safety and security.

Machiavelli's political theory, then, represents a concerted effort to exclude issues of authority and legitimacy from consideration in the discussion of political decision-making and political judgement. Nowhere does this come out more clearly than in his treatment of the relationship between law and force. Machiavelli acknowledges that good laws and good arms constitute the dual foundations of a well-ordered political system. But he immediately adds that since coercion creates legality, he will concentrate his attention on force. He says, “Since there cannot be good laws without good arms, I will not consider laws but speak of arms” (Machiavelli 1965, 47). In other words, the legitimacy of law rests entirely upon the threat of coercive force; authority is impossible for Machiavelli as a right apart from the power to enforce it. Consequently, Machiavelli is led to conclude that fear is always preferable to affection in subjects, just as violence and deception are superior to legality in effectively controlling them. Machiavelli observes that “one can say this in general of men: they are ungrateful, disloyal, insincere and deceitful, timid of danger and avid of profit. . . . Love is a bond of obligation which these miserable creatures break whenever it suits them to do so; but fear holds them fast by a dread of punishment that never passes” (Machiavelli 1965, 62; translation altered). As a result, Machiavelli cannot really be said to have a theory of obligation separate from the imposition of power; people obey only because they fear the consequences of not doing so, whether the loss of life or of privileges. And of course, power alone cannot obligate one, inasmuch as obligation assumes that one cannot meaningfully do otherwise.

Concomitantly, a Machiavellian perspective directly attacks the notion of any grounding for authority independent of the sheer possession of power. For Machiavelli, people are compelled to obey purely in deference to the superior power of the state. If I think that I should not obey a particular law, what eventually leads me to submit to that law will be either a fear of the power of the state or the actual exercise of that power. It is power which in the final instance is necessary for the enforcement of conflicting views of what I ought to do; I can only choose not to obey if I possess the power to resist the demands of the state or if I am willing to accept the consequences of the state's superiority of coercive force. Machiavelli's argument in *The Prince* is designed to demonstrate that politics can only coherently be defined in terms of the supremacy of coercive power; authority as a right to command has no independent status. He substantiates this assertion by reference to the observable realities of political affairs and public life as well as by arguments revealing the self-interested nature of all human conduct. For Machiavelli it is meaningless and futile to speak of any claim to authority and the right to command which is detached from the possession of superior political power. The ruler who lives by his rights alone will surely wither and die by those same rights, because in the rough-and-tumble of political conflict those who prefer power to authority are more likely to succeed. Without exception the authority of states and their laws will never be acknowledged when they are not supported by a show of power which renders obedience inescapable. The methods for achieving obedience are varied, and depend heavily upon the foresight that the prince exercises. Hence, the successful ruler needs special training.