

The Significance of Mercenaries

In Chapter XVII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli has this to say about the character of a prince's subjects: "For one can generally say this about men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, simulators and deceivers, avoiders of danger, greedy for gain; and while you work for their good they are completely yours, offering you their blood, their property, their lives, their sons, as I said earlier, when danger is far away; but when it comes nearer to you they turn away."¹ Yet, in chapters XII and XIII, Machiavelli emphatically makes the case that a wise prince should arm and rely upon his own subjects – the *contado*, or peasantry – as soldiers, rather than mercenaries or auxiliary troops. He even states that the present ruin of Italy is caused by nothing other than dependence for a long period of time on mercenary forces. This conclusion comes after Machiavelli recounts the logical dilemmas and readily evident historical examples posed by reliance on either mercenary or auxiliary troops. He states that "mercenaries have no other love nor other motive to keep them in the field than a meager wage"; they enjoy being soldiers during times of peace, but when war comes they desert.² Auxiliary troops, meaning those serving under another regime and called upon as an ally to render assistance, are deemed even worse. If auxiliary troops lose in war, the principality remains defeated. If they win, the prince becomes obliged to them at best, imprisoned by them at worst, and certainly well short of the ultimate princely ends of "honor, fame, and glory." No principality is safe without having its own soldiers: "on the contrary, it is completely subject to Fortune, not having the power and the loyalty to defend it in times of adversity."³

Even so, the question has to be asked why Machiavelli would so adamantly call for the building of a citizens' militia when so much of *The Prince* is focused upon securing the prince's power over his subjects. Why would a prince arm and train his subjects how to fight? In contrast to early fifteenth-century civic humanist literature, which emphasized that liberty and justice must constitute the main values in political life, Machiavelli's contemporaries associated with advice-for-princes literature emphasized that the essential business of government should consist of maintaining security and peace.⁴ An ideal principality is one where a prince's subjects have been *subdued* and where the general tenor of public affairs is that of tranquility. Machiavelli himself repeatedly states that the chief duty of a ruler is to attend to his own security and strength while ensuring at the same time that his subjects are stable and secure, although as we will come to see, his vision is not one of an anaesthetized, humble *polis*. Regardless, behind the drive for stability and security is a notion more fundamental to Renaissance humanism: the proposition that *virtù* serves to overcome the power of Fortune, meaning chance, to dominate human affairs.

¹ Machiavelli, Niccolò, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa, in *The Portable Machiavelli* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1979), p. 131.

² Machiavelli, p. 116.

³ Machiavelli, p. 123.

⁴ Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume I: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 123.

Machiavelli's conception of *virtù* departs from that of his predecessors and contemporaries – a departure that is central to his framework and substantiates the importance he places on an armed citizenry. Among the humanist literature associated with political theory from the early to the late Renaissance, *The Prince* is a recognizable contribution to a well-established tradition of giving advice to political rulers, while at the same time a challenge to, if not a repudiation of, that tradition at its very core. The core of that tradition argues that the legitimacy of political authority is entirely derivative of moral goodness; that the use of political power is only just if exercised by a ruler whose personal moral character is strictly virtuous. Among Machiavelli's contemporaries, a man of virtue must display all the leading Christian virtues as well as the virtues singled out by the moralists of antiquity. Taken from Plato's four principal virtues, a prince should display prudence, or wisdom, which is taken to include reason, intelligence, circumspection, and sagacity. The virtue of temperance follows, which goes with modesty, abstinence, chastity, honesty, moderation, and sobriety. The third virtue is fortitude, or bravery, a virtue appropriate above all to princes. And last, there is the overarching virtue of justice, divided into divine, natural, and civil aspects. All of these virtues, however, are held in vain unless they are supplemented and strengthened by the fundamental Christian qualities of piety, religion, and faith. Further still, towards the later Renaissance period, all rulers must seek to acquire the related virtues of generosity and magnificence, as opposed to parsimony and avarice. A prince should harbor the virtue of clemency, and always aim to be not merely loved but adored by his subjects, as opposed to being feared. And lastly, the prince must remain at all times the soul of honor, always giving his word freely and never breaking his promises – a bastion of truthfulness. In having such a character, the prince would become the true *vir virtutis*, or man of supreme virtue, and the honor, glory, and fame of his principality would both naturally and divinely follow.

For Machiavelli, in their emphasis on the connection between virtue and legitimate authority, his contemporaries fail to emphasize the significance of sheer power in political life, and what is required to abate, if not overmatch, the powers of Fortune. In contrast to the notion that a life of supreme virtue as described will enable a prince to attain the highest goals of honor, glory, and fame, Machiavelli insists that this picture naively overlooks the extent to which the maintenance of a principality depends on an unflinching willingness to supplement the arts of persuasion with the employment of effective military force. He declares that “there cannot exist good laws where there are no good armies, and where there are good armies there must be good laws”, and thus a prince:

must not have any other object nor any other thought, nor must he take anything as his profession but war, its institutions, and its discipline; because that is the only profession which befits one who commands; and it is of such importance that not only does it maintain those who were born princes, but many times it enables men of private station to rise to that position; and, on the other hand, it is

evident that when princes have given more thought to personal luxuries than to arms, they have lost their state.⁵

Machiavelli's prince must have *virtù* – understood as that quality of energy, vitality, and courage that enables him to achieve greatness and power in the face of both inopportune Fortune and, as he understands it, the consequences stemming from the fundamentally wicked nature of human inclinations and behavior. Only by means of the proper application of power can individuals be brought to obey, and will the prince be able to maintain the state in safety and security. Princely *virtù* requires the courage to employ all the vices that accompany the virtues characteristic of the *vir virtutis*, and the intelligence and wisdom to know which vices to employ in particular circumstances. The prince must be a man of flexible disposition, capable of varying his conduct from good to evil and back again as circumstances dictate. As Skinner states, it is this aspect of princely government – ignored in a self-consciously civilized manner by most of his contemporaries – that Machiavelli restores with great polemical emphasis, insisting on the need of “an economy of violence.”⁶

Machiavelli's insists that if a ruler is genuinely concerned to maintain his state, he will have to unflinchingly shake off the demands of Christian virtue, wholeheartedly embracing the very different morality that his situation dictates. This different morality, however, has often been understood in the extreme as nothing short of pure wickedness, with Machiavelli nothing but the press secretary for the devil incarnate. More often, however, this morality has been interpreted not as a different morality, but as something entirely separate from morality – what might be called the amoral interpretation. Machiavelli's call to draw upon *whatever* character traits lend themselves to the strength and vitality of the state comes as a result of the incompatibility between virtue understood as necessarily good-in-itself, and that of politics understood as adopting means to ends and the employment of technical skills necessary to “make the trains run on time,” the floodwaters abate, and the borders secure. The interpretation of Machiavelli here is that not only does he dismiss the Christian virtues as immaterial to the creation and maintenance of a state, but in making politics insensible to morality he also breaks from the Aristotelian tradition begun in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where political science and virtue ethics are inextricably interwoven. It is through this interpretation, held by many, that Machiavelli – in divorcing politics from morality, no matter how anguishing such a divorce may seem to be – has secured the title, if you will, of the “founder” of modern political thought.

Regardless of Machiavelli's titular status, what is certain is that over the course of nearly 500 years, *The Prince* has been, and remains, fertile ground for widely divergent interpretations of even Machiavelli's most basic political principles and objectives. Consider Isaiah Berlin's response to the notion that Machiavelli's political disposition is fundamentally amoral and the divorce of politics and ethics within his framework complete:

⁵ Machiavelli, p. 124.

⁶ Skinner, p. 130—an “economy of violence” attributed to Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (London, 1961), pp. 220–4.

If ethics is confined to, let us say, Stoic or Christian or Kantian, or even some types of utilitarian ethics, where the source and criterion of value are the word of God, or eternal reason, or some inner sense or knowledge of good and evil, of right and wrong, voices which speak directly to the individual consciousness with absolute authority, this might have been tenable [as an interpretation of *The Prince*]. But there exists an equally time-honored ethics, that of the Greek *polis*, of which Aristotle provided the clearest exposition. Since men are beings made by nature to live in communities, their communal purposes are the ultimate values from which the rest are derived, or with which their ends as individuals are identified. Politics – the art of living in a *polis* – is not an activity that can be dispensed with by those who prefer private life; it is not like seafaring or sculpture which those who do not wish to do so need not undertake. Political conduct is intrinsic to being a human being at a certain stage of civilization, and what it demands is intrinsic to living a successful life.⁷

Berlin here argues the exact opposite of those who understand Machiavelli as divorcing politics from ethics. To the degree that Quentin Skinner agrees with Berlin, the difference between Machiavelli and his contemporaries cannot adequately be characterized as a difference between a moral view of politics and a view of politics as divorced from morality. The essential contrast, rather, is between two different moralities – two rival and incompatible accounts of what ought ultimately to be done.⁸ For Berlin, Machiavelli is

indeed rejecting Christian ethics, but in favor of another system, another moral universe – the world of Pericles or of Scipio, or even of Duke Valentino, a society geared to ends just as ultimate as the Christian faith, a society in which men fight and are ready to die for (public) ends which they pursue for their own sakes. They are choosing not a realm of means (called politics) as opposed to a realm of ends (called morals), but opt for a rival (Roman or classical) morality, an alternative realm of ends. In other words, the conflict is between two moralities, Christian and pagan (or as some wish to call it, aesthetic), not between autonomous realms of morals and politics.⁹

Under this interpretation, Machiavelli's call for a citizens' militia makes sense; a prince does not secure his principality with a populace of meek men. Machiavelli sees Christianity as less capable than Roman and Greek paganism of producing (among the populace) fortitude and love of liberty from foreign rule – the Christianity of his day, as he saw it, glorified humble and contemplative men, whereas the ancient religions honored only men of action replete with worldly glory. On this point, Nicolai Rubinstein writes that if *The Prince* contained a specific message to the Florentines, it can be found in chapter IX on the civil principality, where Machiavelli advises the private citizen, who

⁷ Berlin, Isaiah, "The Question of Machiavelli," *The New York Review of Books*, November 4, 1971, p. 7.

⁸ Skinner, p. 135.

⁹ Berlin, p. 8.

with support of other citizens becomes prince of his fatherland, his *patria*, to found his power on the people rather than on the nobility because such a power base will give him greater security.¹⁰ Further, the question of the proper use of force would involve a program of civic education and help to generate civic virtue. How does a prince make someone identify with the peace and stability of a polity? He allows that person to make it his personal business that the *polis* is peaceful. In defending the *polis*, loyalty to the prince is fostered, in that the prince's subjects come to identify with and become invested in the rule and well-being of the principality.

Summary

- Machiavelli and his contemporaries emphasized that the essential business of government should consist of maintaining security and peace.
- Machiavelli emphatically makes the case that a wise prince should arm and rely upon his own subjects as soldiers, rather than mercenaries or auxiliary troops.
- Given Machiavelli's view of human nature as ungrateful, fickle, cowardly, deceitful, and greedy, and given that so much of *The Prince* is focused on securing the prince's power over his subjects, it must be asked why Machiavelli is an advocate of the arming and martial training of a prince's subjects.
- According to Machiavelli's contemporaries, a prince should display all the leading Christian virtues, as well as the virtues singled out by the moralists of antiquity. In having such a character, the prince would become the true *vir virtutis*, or man of supreme virtue, and would serve as a model for a humble citizenry. The stability and security requisite to the honor, glory, and fame of his principality would both naturally and divinely follow.
- For Machiavelli, princely *virtù* requires the courage to employ all the vices that accompany the virtues characteristic of the *vir virtutis*, and the intelligence and wisdom to know which vices to employ in particular circumstances. The prince must be a man of flexible disposition, capable of varying his conduct from good to evil and back again, as circumstances dictate, to ensure the stability and security of his principality.
- By investing citizens with arms and martial training, Machiavelli seeks to foster, as Berlin puts it, "a society in which men fight and are ready to die for (public) ends which they pursue for their own sakes." In being allowed (and required) to defend the *polis*, loyalty to the prince is fostered, in that the prince's subjects become invested in the rule and well-being of the principality.

¹⁰ Rubinstein, Nicolai, "A new epoch: Machiavelli," in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 46.