

Machiavelli, Moral for His Time: Psychology, Politics, and Morality

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Abstract: The paper will present Machiavelli's realism, considered as rejecting the involvement of morals and religion in politics, as actually pointing toward a consequentialist morality. His psychological statements, at both the individual and the population levels, are the grounds that give rise to political reality, and from which Machiavelli formulates an outline for a leader's conduct with a view to stabilizing government and law during trying times of intra-state changes and external wars and in light of the existential needs driving both individuals and populations. In this respect, Machiavelli demands that the prince possess self-perfection on the road to governmental stability. By this reading, good and evil are relative concepts that depend on circumstantial contexts. Machiavelli thus constructs the model of a virtual person that can be used for predicting conduct in various situations. The need to rein in the impulses of a multitude of individuals that do not perceive anything but the promotion of their existential aspirations and their own improvement require flexibility in a leader's conduct. In this respect, The Prince acts as a guide for preferring a present lesser evil over a future greater evil. The article will be based on the comparative analysis of texts in The Prince and in the Discourses on Livy and their association with their time of writing. In this sense, Machiavelli can be seen as pouring psychology, politics, and temporality into a single 'chalice' of consequentialist ethics, something unknown in the history of political thought.

METHODOLOGY

The article is grounded in a qualitative and interpretive methodology that focuses on a textual analysis of the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, and especially The Prince and the Discourses on Livy. The analysis itself, in turn, seeks to examine the intertextual encounter between the political ideas and psychological characteristics embedded in Machiavelli's works, and to expose the manner in which these aspects are incorporated into Machiavelli's conception of governance.

In addition, the article is further grounded in a close reading of the texts, and in a contextual and historical interpretation with a view to tracing Machiavelli's political and scholarly intentions. By so doing, the

article seeks to clarify the works' internal logic as well as the manner in which they present practical tools for governmental stabilization during periods of political and social instability.

Furthermore, the qualitative approach facilitates the examination of hidden strata of meaning and mutual relations between political and psychological concepts, as well as the associations between Machiavelli's perceptions of humanity and the conceptions of state and leadership that are reflected in his works.

Theoretical Background

Machiavelli's works were written against the background of Italy at the time. What we are concerned with is a difficult period characterized by Italy's weakness in the wars against France and Spain as well as pan-European changes: the decrease in religious influence, the breakdown of feudalism, and the rise of the middle class. Machiavelli analysed political experience through time and observed human individual behaviour alongside the behaviour of groups within states over time. He reflected on himself too, and used all of these inputs to form a virtual model of a person whose conduct in certain situations can be predicted—whether as an individual or as multiple individuals which are effectively a group. According to this psychological model, people may be directed by Machiavelli's image of a leader.

Ethical and political studies tend to exaggerate Machiavelli's image of a promoter of oppressive and autocratic leadership, and further tend to examine Machiavelli from a narrow perspective¹ which ignores the fact that Machiavelli's ethics in *The Prince* are not absolute, but rather related to the manner in which things are done such as to accord with the dynamic circumstances of his time that required a stable government alongside law and order. Isaiah Berlin, for one, views Machiavelli as a pioneer of intellectual morality. In this respect, and despite his 'parenthesizing' of absolute morals, Machiavelli can be seen as an innovator searching for answers in cases involving a clash of morals.

Machiavelli worked at a time when it was necessary to balance religious morals against the survival of the public community. To this end, he makes use of power to ensure the survivability of life and property, as well as the stability of government and law as a remedy to the political weakness and infirmity of the Italy of his time.

¹ In this respect, see, for example, Leo Strauss (2001), "Machiavelli as the Harbinger of Modern Political Philosophy" in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. Ehud Luz (pp. 91-112), Jerusalem: Leo Beck Publishing [In Hebrew], who refers to Machiavelli as a "...grandmaster of blasphemy..." (112), and notes that "...[Machiavelli's] moral foundations are grounded in immorality..." (113) (my translations).

Machiavelli's guidance in *The Prince* is grounded in a psychological model of human behaviour within an ethical framework as follows:

I. Machiavelli never instructs the prince to act out of anger, vengeance, envy etc. Quite the contrary. Machiavelli instructs the prince to always act with discretion and restraint.

II. Any use of violence for the sole purpose of controlling people is null and void *ab initio*. Proportional violence is recommended, but only within the boundaries of the law and with a view to re-organizing the human tendency toward doing whatever they like. In other words, violence is meant for reinforcing a leader's image and thus actually cutting down the need for uncontrolled violence at a later point in time.

III. Machiavelli instructs the ruler to engage in constant self-reflection and to be meticulous about maintaining an ethical parallel between his conduct and the stabilisation of government and the law as the objective of said conduct.

IV. The prince is a personality capable of determining its own destiny. Machiavelli censures princes who act out of hunger for power. Machiavelli notes that such a prince is not only immortal but also someone who will make mistakes since such a ruler resembles the egotistical model governing his subjects' behaviour.

V. The prince must not emulate the common people's psychological model seeking to maximize their holdings in all circumstances. As an individual personality, the prince must learn to act flexibly and according to situational dynamics in space and time. The political background and upheavals (of Machiavelli's time) justify crooked and devious conduct by the ruler, but only to the extent required for shaping their image in relation to their subjects.

As a realist² opposed to the integration of religion and morality³ in politics, Machiavelli was ahead of his time in the sense that, over and above his pioneering use of psychological directives, Machiavelli was perceptive enough to understand that people have always lived and live in a world of images long before the advent of mass communications or social networks. Throughout his historical political analyses, Machiavelli penetrated the structure of the human mind, and this served him, *inter alia*, as a premise for guiding the prince according to the rules of 'visibility' as a prophylactic against rebellions, violence, and coups d'état.

² For a discussion of Machiavelli's realism as a foundation for Hobbes' political philosophy, see Leo Strauss (1953), *Natural Right and History*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press (repr. 1999), pp. 177-182.

³ Machiavelli devotes Sections 11-15 in Part I of the *Discourses on Livy* to the value of religion in politics: religion is a political instrument meant for control. The positive part of it is its capacity to educate believers into obeying the law. In other words, it acts a political instrument for balancing egotism against the public interest. Also see the Introduction to Hillay Zmora's 2010 edition of the *Discourses on Livy* into Hebrew (edited by Zmora and translated by Miriam Schusterman-Padovano) (Jerusalem: Shalem Press), pp. 27-28.

Machiavelli makes extensive use of his realism-grounded, human-modelled and psychologically analysed approach to shape the prince's image (especially the new image) in the eyes of his subjects. The psychological and behavioural motives of the individual and the populace thus act as a roadmap for the twisted path Machiavelli navigates through, where, for example, cruelty and the non-keeping of promises become relative concepts which are not necessarily perceived derogatorily. In this respect, Machiavelli does not perceive the individual and populace's behaviour as being wicked per se, but rather as a necessity of human nature arising from existential needs accompanied by a constant aspiration toward self-improvement which we presently acknowledge in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.⁴ The behaviour associated with the human egotism model is necessarily accompanied by desires, envy, greed, and fears.⁵ We are, after all, concerned with the psychological foundation of the human mind, which might become violent and wild when it requires means for survival, and later when it cannot be sated. Such a reality, in turn, justifies crooked and devious conduct by a ruler. The stability of government at such times, therefore, is for the people's benefit and requires the restraint of individual urges, whether concerned with survival or with enrichment. It therefore follows that Machiavelli's psycho-political guidance for a prince is the reason that justifies the prince's twisting and devious behaviour as a means to an end.⁶

By this reading, it is more readily apparent how Machiavelli, as a pioneering psychological realist, admits pure morality into his political philosophy through the back door. The distinction he makes between intentionalist morality (what I want to attain) and an applied consequentialist morality (what I do to that end) thus neutralizes what is pejoratively referred to as "Machiavellism". In this respect, Machiavelli uses *The Prince* to embed a 'sedimentary' morality meant to direct the ruler toward a constant critical reflection surrounding intentionalist morality so as to keep the ruler 'pure'. Put differently, Machiavelli makes a sharp distinction between how the ruler should appear to their subjects and how they should appear to themselves.⁷

⁴ See Maslow, A.H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review* 50(4): 370-396; Maslow, A.H. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper; Zmora (2010), pp. 37-38.

⁵ Zmora (2010), pp. 37-38.

⁶ In chapter 18 of *The Prince* (pp. 68-71 in the Mansfield translation), Machiavelli instructs the prince to break loyalty and act contrary to morality, but only when this is necessary for stabilising government, and further requires him to act in this manner as little as possible. He further notes that this kind of conduct would have been wrong if humans were good, but "...because they are wicked..." (p. 69), such conduct is not evil. See below for a further discussion of this chapter.

⁷ For a concise review of the relation between intentionalist and consequentialist ethics, see pp. 189-201 of Mounitz, A. and Mounitz, N. (2022). Utilitarian Morality of Intention? Problems with the Moral Status

Unlike the hierarchy of purposes Aristotle establishes as a universal measure of justice, Machiavelli introduces a degree of flexibility into the priorities of the Aristotelian hierarchy and incorporates the temporal dimension: not what is worthier, but what is more urgent; what needs to be done in the here and now and in the present circumstances. In other words, Machiavelli is concerned with which among the goals is of greater urgency rather than of greater moral importance.⁸

The Prince is thus full of messages ascribable to consequentialist ethics. A prince must aspire to excellence by studying the actions of the great leaders of the past even as they pay historical attention to ruler actions that produced good results; for Machiavelli, this is the only way in which a prince is meant to calculate the implications of their actions on their subjects. In this respect, and in spite of instructing the prince to shape an image (appearance) that accords with the demands of regime stability, Machiavelli's Prince embeds this 'sedimentary' morality concerned with critical self-reflection in order to maintain the prince's 'purity' over and above and especially in relation to intentionalist ethics as they pertain to the desired outcome(s).

Government Instability

Machiavelli identifies government instability as the worst possible outcome for any citizen.⁹ The deterioration and change of government is thus the source of the citizens' distress. Following Aristotle's idealism, it is actually the realist Machiavelli that focuses his work on regime stability and only then and in a controlled manner proceeds to discuss the desired form of government according with his praise for the Roman Republican government in its prime.¹⁰ In this respect, Machiavelli's preference for republican government as the basis for the three branches of government

of the "Reasonable Person" in the Israeli Supreme Court". In *Law and the Interfaces of Law with Other Disciplines*, ed. M. Wattad et al. (pp. 181-202). Tel Aviv: Nevo [in Hebrew].

⁸ Isaiah Berlin lists a number of scholars who perceived Machiavelli as "...an anguished humanist..." who "...laments the vices of men which make such wicked courses politically unavoidable..." (p. 37). Herder, for example, perceives him as a man "...sensitive to the contours of his time, who faithfully described what others did not admit or recognize..." (p. 39), while others perceived him as "...above all an Italian and a patriot, speaking principally to his own generation..." (p. 39). See "The Originality of Machiavelli" in Isaiah Berlin (2013 [1955]), *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (pp. 33-101). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁹ In this respect, Cosans and Reina stress the importance Machiavelli ascribes to the stability of government; not just in terms of leadership, but also with respect to *The Prince's* relevance to managerial and economic leadership in our own time. See Christopher E. Cosans and Christopher S. Reina (2018). The Leadership Ethics of Machiavelli's *Prince*. *Business Ethics Quarterly* 28(3): 275-300.

¹⁰ *Discourses on Livy*, Book I, Chapter 2.

in modern democracies is notably prominent in and accepted by present-day scholarship.¹¹

In the Discourses on Livy, as well as in Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli often uses psychological concepts and grounds his statements concerning the behaviours of individuals and populations in the emotional aspects of the human behavioural model he posits in his works. Examples include his contrast of humility and pride, softness and cruelty, imagination and reality, anger and vengeance as opposed to discretion, and habit as opposed to change. These behavioural and psychological descriptions, in turn, form a roadmap for instructing rulers in *The Prince*.

For example, Machiavelli criticizes Piero Soderini for squandering his virtues, as well as modes of leadership that bring ruin to a state because they hinder the truth.¹² According to Machiavelli, Soderini failed because his conduct was inflexible. Indeed, inflexibility and the lack of the capacity for manoeuvrability in dynamic political circumstances is the antithesis of everything Machiavelli recommends in *The Prince*, and in this respect the relativity of 'virtue' as a concept becomes readily apparent. As such, there are rulers who behave virtuously and bring ruin just as there are rulers that prevent ruin by conduct that does not accord with the arbitrariness of the accepted conception of virtue. In other words, it is only the result which determines the nature of "virtue" for a ruler.

Analysis of an Intertextual Encounter of Statements Concerning the Advantages of an Open Regime with an Ethical Explanation

Discourses on Livy

(All quotations are from the Mansfield-Tarcov translation)

"...cities have never expanded either in dominion or in riches if they have not been in freedom...." (Book II, Chapter 2).

In praise of the wise leader: "...So that republic can be called happy whose lot is to get one man so prudent that he gives it laws ordered so that it can live securely under them without needing to correct them...." (Book I, Chapter 2).

Following Plato, Machiavelli also criticizes changes in the form of government: "...For the principality easily becomes tyrannical; the aristocrats with ease become a state of the few; the popular is without difficulty converted into the licentious...." (Book I, Chapter 2).

¹¹ See, for example, Aharon Shmueli (1961). Introduction. In *The Political Works of Machiavelli*. Tel Aviv: Schocken Books [In Hebrew], p. 30.

¹² *The Prince*, chapter 25; Shmueli (1961), pp. 25-26 [In Hebrew].

Machiavelli also denounces libel and demands that defamers be punished severely. He finds many faults (curses) in states that do not punish the latter, since the creeping contamination of public opinion angers the populace and intensifies rage and hatred in the state. This later causes retaliation against the defamers that undermines political stability. According to Machiavelli, hatred is a stronger emotion than fear. Here, too, we are concerned with reasoning based on Machiavelli's psychological model of political behaviour. In Machiavelli's opinion, hatred is a stronger emotion than fear. This, in turn, is another case where Machiavelli's reasoning is based on his psychological model of human political behaviour. For example, Machiavelli claims that the many political scandals in Florence would not have occurred if Florence had anti-libel laws (Book I, Chapter 8).

In the spirit of the desired ideal government, Machiavelli devotes an entire chapter of the Discourses on Livy to praising those who establish a republic and denounces those who establish tyrannies (Book I, Chapter 10). In this chapter, among other things, Machiavelli provides the example of the Roman emperors who ruled justly and honestly. He commends them by name and stresses that they did not require the legions to guard their person, unlike the 'wicked' Roman emperors like Caligula, Nero, Vitellius, and others. In his positive review of the Roman republic at its prime of peace and welfare, Machiavelli further commends its freedoms of expression and speech, and denounces those periods of wars, rebellions, and cruelty that led to the republic's downfall.

In Book I, Chapter 16, Machiavelli provides an example from the animal world. Here, too, Machiavelli grounds his statement in a degree of psychological surety conveyed through an animal world metaphor. We are concerned, Machiavelli states, with a people who were accustomed to living under a dictatorship. Just as a wild animal released into the woods after several years in a cage will never be able to adapt itself to being hunted and to hiding from danger, so people under a dictatorship are incapable of transitioning into a democracy and will even oppose it from within in order to bring liberty down and resume the benefits they obtained from the tyrant.¹³

The Reasons for Shifting from a Liberal to a Coercive Government

Chapter 19 in the Discourses on Livy is full of psychological statements on the standing of a weak ruler who inherits the role from a strong ruler. In this respect, Machiavelli provides historical examples showing how the

¹³ Berlin commends Machiavelli for tearing away the mask of hypocrisy and revealing the cruel truth in expressing his disbelief in the principles of absolute morality that are disconnected from an empirical view of human egotism (Berlin 2013, pp. 89-92). In this respect, I believe that Machiavelli accorded a greater empirical weight to the self-preservation model than to the absolute moral ideal which he perceives as utopian.

inheriting ruler enjoys the powerful impression left by their predecessor; an impression that is not necessarily projected by the former. An example Machiavelli provides in this respect is that of David, Solomon, and Rehoboam. Another example he provides is that of the Turkish Sultan Bajazet II, who enjoyed the achievements of his father Mahomet II, but whose heir brought ruin upon the empire. The importance of a ruler's image in relation to their people thus becomes readily apparent, especially with regard to a new ruler who has yet to stabilize their image.

In *Discourses on Livy*, Chapter 34, Machiavelli prefers a dictatorship if it satisfies three conditions: (1) it benefits the people; (2) it is not unlawful in that the senate or the consuls imbue one among them or another person with authority and only in special circumstances referred to as an "hour of need", such as a security threat, a severe economic crisis, etc., and (3) if it is temporary. In this case, too, Machiavelli off-handedly presents a psychological example from the conduct of Roman consuls as his reasoning. As Machiavelli phrases it, "...They thought that if an accident came in which Rome might have need of this kingly power, they would have to make him voluntarily; and in making him themselves, it would pain them less...". In other words, a dictatorship is only legitimate if it is temporary, established in an hour of need, and without tyranny or the pursuit of honour.

Psychological Motivation in The Prince: External Optics as opposed to the Prince's Inner Truth

As a whole, *The Prince* represents Machiavelli's preference for consequentialist over intentionalist ethics. It also shows the conceptual flexibility of "virtue". It only does this, however, after it establishes the stability of law and government as the desired goal. The association between the desired goal and the prince, in turn, requires an act which takes the temporal dimension into account. Accordingly, and by preferring the lesser evil now over the greater evil later, Machiavelli links morality, virtue, and the needs of the moment. In a preliminary discussion of ruler conduct in domestic policy in Chapter 15, and in the spirit of the human-psychological model he outlined, Machiavelli states that the difference between the manner in which people should live and the manner in which they live in practice is so great that a leader who is unaware of it will almost certainly fail and their regime will not last for very long. A ruler that makes a habit out of giving favours to his subjects, states Machiavelli, will end up getting lost, because those who are wicked are far more numerous than those who are good and honest. Accordingly, Machiavelli advises the ruler to make use of favours in a controlled manner and only as much as is necessary. In the spirit of his pessimist mass psychology, Machiavelli also presents human traits and explains them: misers (*avaro* in the original) as opposed to spendthrifts, people

who are loyal as opposed to traitorous, people who are weak as opposed to people who are brave, people who are social as opposed to prideful, lascivious as opposed to modest, honest as opposed to cunning, unyielding as opposed to yielding, etc.

With respect to ethics, Machiavelli stresses that it would be very desirable if all the virtues he notes were part of the prince's character. However, and given the Machiavellian realist model of conduct, Machiavelli fears that such conduct will not last in reality. Accordingly, Machiavelli recommends that the prince be cunning. Adherence to virtues with no flexibility in shaping his external image according to the dynamics of real-world circumstances might, therefore, lead to his downfall due to the volatility of human nature. On the other hand, the capacity to appear as possessing situationally-suitable vices might reinforce the prince's image and stabilize their regime and thus benefit their citizens. In this respect, it should be noted that Machiavelli's main goal in writing *The Prince* was to stabilize the government during a challenging period of instability, infighting, and external military and political upheavals.

In Chapter 16, we can clearly note Machiavelli's use of mass psychology when he instructs the prince to internalize the importance of how he appears to the masses. In Machiavelli's words, "...I say that it would be good to be held liberal; nevertheless, liberality, when used so that you may be held liberal, hurts you...." (pp. 62-63 in the Mansfield translation). He then says that "...In the end it will be necessary, if he wants to maintain a name for liberality, to burden the people extraordinarily, to be rigorous with taxes, and to do all those things that can be done to get money..." (p. 63). These acts, in turn, will rapidly make him hated by the people, and his poverty will reduce his esteem among the people. This state of affairs will then lead him to hardships and risks because his liberality benefitted the few and harmed the many and will thus make him appear mean or miserly.¹⁴ In other words, Machiavelli instructs the prince to engage in a lesser evil now than in a greater evil in the future. Similarly, the prince should appear to be a little negative now rather than absolutely negative in the future.

Machiavelli's psychological motivation requires that the ruler engage in self-criticism and in constant self-reflection in the sense of (1) always trying to view themselves from their subjects' point of view, and (2) considering the future in the present. More specifically, the prince should consider how he appears now and how he will appear in the future. The ruler should not fear being considered a miser, since he will eventually be held as liberal when, in due time, the people will see that their budget

¹⁴ Machiavelli also discusses this in the *Discourses on Livy*, Book I, Chapter 29. In Chapter 30, Machiavelli discusses the means necessary for avoiding ungratefulness and offers the Roman Empire as one who managed to avoid such a predicament in relation to both the people and the military.

is balanced as a result of his parsimony, and that he is capable of protecting their people from enemies and attaining other goals without imposing a significant tax burden, and all this without demanding anything from the people. Machiavelli later provides historical examples both positive and negative for reinforcing his position.¹⁵ Despite his flexibility in construing this concept, Machiavelli remains on the moral end of political philosophy since he uses morality to describe flexible conduct that adapts itself to circumstances and is context-dependent on the response of a ruler faced with a given set of circumstances.

Insofar as personal morality is concerned, Machiavelli states that “...Therefore, so as not to have to rob his subjects...a prince should esteem it little to incur a name for meanness...” (p. 64) [a lesser present evil]. Machiavelli’s morality is further reinforced in his critique of the rapaciousness of such rulers as Cyrus, Alexander, and Julius Caesar. In Machiavelli’s words: “...And for the prince who goes out with his armies, who feeds on booty, pillage, and ransom, and manages on what belongs to someone else, this liberality is necessary...” (p. 64). Put differently, distributing the property of others to their armies did not impinge upon their honour and did not harm them. However, if they were liberal at their subjects’ expense, this would harm them greatly, because such a spendthrift cannot refrain from being one until he has nothing more to give, at which point he is forced to rob his subjects [a greater future evil]. This is, according to Machiavelli, a sure road to ridicule, shame, and hatred that endangers government stability.

As noted above, Machiavelli makes a distinction between the image the prince should assume for the sake of appearances toward his subjects and his duty to maintain an ethical self-awareness of how he appears in his own eyes. Beyond ruling out robbery and pillaging, therefore, Machiavelli’s goal is government stability in an age of changes and risks to individual property and personal safety. We are thus concerned with a clear moral intent that motivates Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Indeed, and contrary to his present image, Machiavelli did in fact address the proximity and distance between politics and morality: He discussed the tension between the two but never disconnected them. Even as he peels off historical and religious layers from the concept of “virtue”, considered absolute, he still adheres to the concept but defies convention in transforming it from absolute to relative.

In chapter 17 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli considers the harmful and beneficial relations between mercy and cruelty in the sense of how these traits are viewed by the people. In another example of his psychological

¹⁵ See the extensive discussion of this on p. 65 of Hilla Zmora (2004). *Machiavelli’s Morality*. *Tchelet* 16: 59-68 [in Hebrew].

analysis, Machiavelli establishes a connection between mercy and cruelty and love and fear. Thus, and in the spirit of consequentialist ethics, Machiavelli praises Cesare Borgia, who acted cruelly toward the people of Rome. However, in Machiavelli's reading, Borgia turns out to be merciful because he rehabilitated the state and led it toward peace and loyalty. On the other hand, however, he denounces the rivalry between the factions within Florence that led to the ruin of Pistoia. In other words, this is another case where the psycho-political model leads him to stress the importance of a prince's image in the eyes of the masses. Grounding himself in optics as a tool for political stabilization, Machiavelli then expands the discussion to address the advantage of being feared over loved.¹⁶ Accordingly, and from a cost-benefit perspective accounting for the temporal dimension, it is better to suffer a lesser evil now over a greater evil down the line. Machiavelli later states that "... it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two. For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain. While you do them good, they are yours [...] when the need for them is far away; but, when it is close to you, they revolt [...] And men have less hesitation to offend one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared..." (p. 66). Within the framework of his guidance concerning external visibility, Machiavelli warns a prince not to harm his subjects' property or women since "...if he does not acquire love, he escapes hatred..." (p. 67). In this respect, Machiavelli further instructs the prince to balance fear against the absence of hatred, "...and if he also needs to proceed against someone's life, he must do it when there is suitable justification and manifest cause for it..." (p. 67). In this case, too, and in accordance with the human model he outlines throughout the text, Machiavelli embeds a psychological reasoning for his advice: "...because men forget the death of a father more quickly than the loss of a patrimony..." (p. 67). Machiavelli further suggests that a persona may be executed lawfully in order to instil fear. Such a measure, Machiavelli states, will give rise to fear, but a prince must never touch his subjects' property, because this is never lawful and will always give rise to hatred. As noted above, all this is meant to stabilize a regime during times of upheaval and uncertainty. This is also the spirit Machiavelli adopts later in this chapter with respect to foreign policy, using the example of Hannibal, who was cruel, but whose image prevented revolts and even gave rise to admiration toward him that brought other good traits of his to the forefront. Machiavelli then ends the chapter with a clear psychological 'envelope': "...since men love at their convenience and fear at the convenience of the prince, a wise prince should found himself on what is

¹⁶ Also see Zmora (2010), pp. 19-23 [In Hebrew].

his [that is to say fear], not on what is someone else's [that is to say hatred]; he should only contrive to avoid hatred, as was said..." (68).¹⁷

Chapter 18 begins with an unambiguous moral statement: "...How praiseworthy it is for a prince to keep his faith, and to live with honesty and not by astuteness, everyone understands..." (p. 68-69). In this case, we are concerned with a clearly ethical statement that establishes Machiavelli as moral even from an intentionalist ethical perspective. However, and by way of analogy, intentions are not something you can bank on. Good intentions are important but are irrelevant in an egotistical world where actions are what matters. Machiavelli then proceeds to state that "...Nonetheless one sees by experience in our times that the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith and have known how to get around men's brains with their astuteness; and in the end they have overcome those who have founded themselves on loyalty..." (p. 69). Later in the chapter, Machiavelli advises a prince to adopt two animal traits: the cunning of a fox who knows how to avoid traps, and the courage of the lion who does not know how to avoid traps but knows how to defend itself from wolves. In a realist state of affairs resting on Machiavelli's statement that humans will prey on each other unless they fear their government (at least to some extent) "...A prudent lord, therefore, cannot observe faith, nor should he, when such observance turns against him, and the causes that made him promise have been eliminated..." (p. 69). In other words, faithfulness depends on circumstances rather than on the pure morality of good intentions.

Machiavelli thus imbues intentionalist ethics with flexibility according with the time and the place.¹⁸ In his own words, "...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..." (p. 69). We thus obtain the ideal moral approach this chapter opens with, viz. keeping faith, which is a sharp turn from realism. In other

¹⁷ In this respect, Cosans and Reina (2018) stress that the only reason for preferring fear over love is the existence of deceitful people with no conscience that might aspire to harm the ruler. While Machiavelli ascribes a great deal of value to the love of the people toward a ruler, a certain degree of fear might very well save a ruler's life in a society where a ruler might be assaulted during, say, a church ceremony. It is therefore advisable to maintain a delicate balance between being loved by the people and maintaining a certain level of fear in them.

¹⁸ Prideaux (2026) outlines morality as a dynamic and continuous expression; a kind of subjective habituation to social constraints. In other words, what we are concerned with here is an interaction which forces individuals to maintain a local order that prevents internal disorder in a system (a state, a tribe, a group, etc.). In other words, morality is a dynamic process that expands in accordance with communal needs. A moral failing (by an individual or a small group) thus advances an internal systemic disorder which may even undermine the greater system (such as the state). See Paul D. Prideaux (2026). *Moral Order as Emergent Constraint: A Thermodynamic Analogy for the Expansion of Cooperative Boundaries*. *PhilArchive*, uploaded February 21, 2026. <https://philarchive.org/rec/PRIMO-5>.

words, and in light of real-world demands, Machiavelli maneuvers between worthy morality and present realism; between intentionalist ethics and an ethics of action, necessity, and reality.

A further reinforcement for the title of the present paper, “moral for his time”, can be obtained from Machiavelli’s statement that “...it is not necessary for a prince to have all the above mentioned qualities [fox and lion] in fact, but it is indeed necessary to appear to have them [...] by having them [in his nature] and always observing them, they are harmful [...] And so he needs to have a spirit disposed to change as the winds of fortune and variations of things command him...” (p. 70). Machiavelli later instructs a prince to “...not depart from good [the moral ideal], when possible, but know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity...” (p. 70). To Machiavelli, appearance is a necessary evil and is thus the lesser evil. After all, the image of a prince as a lion, as we saw in chapter 17, is created “... if he also needs to proceed against someone’s life, he must do it when there is suitable justification and manifest cause for it...” (p. 67). Cruelty is thus justified for hanging a robber in the city square and thus projecting cruelty and instilling fear. Such visibility, in turn, suffices to prevent revolts and preserve discipline in wartime (as was the case with Hannibal), but not for touching other people’s property and not for expropriating what belongs to others. The fox, in turn, knows how to avoid a commitment when this might harm government stability, a stability which is the declared goal of *The Prince* with respect to the people’s benefit.

In chapter 19 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli reinforces the behavioural recommendations he made in earlier chapters with psychological and behavioural rules. For example, a prince must avoid conduct that might give rise to popular hatred and contempt toward him, since the latter two pose the greatest risk to government stability. The other vices (such as miserliness), in comparison, constitute a lesser evil when they are not a risk to government stability. Indeed, it is difficult to launch a revolt against a prince who is respected by his subjects. The more a prince prevents hatred and contempt, Machiavelli states, the fewer the motives to conspire against him and the more stable the internal affairs of state. The psychological reasoning here is that “... whoever conspires [against the ruler] always believes he will satisfy the people with the death of the prince [...] For whoever conspires cannot be alone, but he cannot find company except from those he believes to be malcontents....” (p. 73). In such circumstances, a conspirator will assume a risk, since the positive assessment accorded to a prince alongside the law and power they command constitute a deterrent and instil fear, concern, and apprehension with respect to a penalty that terrifies them [the potential rebel]. In this respect, Machiavelli concludes that “... a prince should take little account of conspiracies if the people show good will to him; but if they are hostile and bear hatred for him, he should fear everything

and everyone....” (p. 74). At this point in the chapter, Machiavelli then proceeds to presenting a variety of historical examples supporting his recommendations to princes.

In closing, we will note that a good prince is aware of the egotistical psychological make-up of his people, takes the environmental and temporal circumstances into account and knows how to act accordingly and promptly. Such a prince’s chances of success will thus increase as a function of his pragmatism and flexibility, and it is the latter two that are a virtue to Machiavelli. While pragmatic flexibility might entail the breaking of promises and the shaping of a prince’s optics as cruel, Machiavelli does not perceive such conduct as arbitrary tyranny but rather as wise and beneficial leadership. Accordingly, the efficient leader is thus the most beneficial as well as the most moral to his people.

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