

Notes on *The Prince* by N. Machiavelli (December 2004, John A. Pelesko)

(Signet Classic Edition, introduction by C. Gauss, translator unclear)

*The Prince* is a handbook for attaining and maintaining political power. It is divided into twenty-six chapters plus an opening letter from Machiavelli to Lorenzo the Magnificent. Except for the last chapter, which focuses specifically on Italy in the sixteenth century, each chapter deals with one aspect of attaining or maintaining political power. The book is well outlined by its table of contents. The chapter titles serve as elements of an outline; we will not repeat it here. There are at least three terms used by Machiavelli in a specific way. These are worth highlighting. They are:

- Monarchy – This is used to refer to rule by one individual. He further divides monarchies into hereditary and new. He also notes that the structure of a monarchy might consist of a prince and servants or a prince and barons. These two cases are distinguished by the degree of autonomy enjoyed by barons and not enjoyed by servants.
- Republic – This is used to refer to rule by a governing body. Machiavelli's republic is typified by the Roman Republic.
- Prince – The leader of a monarchy.

It is interesting to note that at the time *The Prince* was written, the notion of a modern democracy did not exist. The notion of a socialist state also did not exist.

Broadly speaking, Machiavelli attempts to solve the problem of how to attain and maintain political power. He addresses numerous specific aspects of this; we note some of the key problems he attempts to solve:

1. Why is a new monarchy more difficult to maintain than a hereditary monarchy? How may a new monarchy be maintained?
2. How does rule by a prince and his servant differ from rule by a prince and his barons? Why is this important?
3. How should conquered republics be governed? Why should the answer to this question differ from governing conquered principalities?
4. How should conquered principalities be governed?
5. How does the way in which power is achieved affect the way in which a state should be governed and held?
6. What is the role of the military in government?
7. How should a prince treat and hold the loyalty of a militia?
8. Is it better to be feared or to be loved?
9. How should a prince act with regard to liberality, miserliness, cruelty, clemency, faith, gaining reputation, choosing his staff, taking counsel, virtues, and vices?

We can state the questions addressed by Machiavelli more succinctly (and less specifically) as follows:

1. What is the proper relationship between a prince and his subjects? That is, how should he govern in every possible case?

2. What is the proper relationship between a prince and those who helped him achieve power or those who help him maintain power? Specifically, the military, barons, etc.
3. Of the various qualities of personality demonstrated by a prince in the course of government or interaction with others, which should be cultivated and which rejected?

Machiavelli repeatedly uses similar forms of argument in defending his answers to each of the above questions. One favorite form of argument is argument by example. Machiavelli will raise a question, give his advice, and then show by example how those who have followed his advice have prospered while those who have not have failed. Machiavelli also makes astute observations about human nature and uses these to bolster his case. The argument is thus: If humans are inclined to act in the following way, we should act as such and such. Let's examine a representative chapter to see how Machiavelli argues in favor of his recommendations. Consider Chapter 17, *Of Cruelty and Clemency, and Whether It Is Better to Be Loved or Feared*. Machiavelli begins the chapter with a categorical statement concerning cruelty versus clemency. In particular, he says:

*"...I say that every prince must desire to be considered merciful and not cruel."*

He then mitigates this statement slightly. He notes that sometimes apparent cruelty can be hidden mercy. He uses Cesare Borgia as an example and expounds upon the apparent/hidden issue. Next, Machiavelli raises directly the following question:

*"From this arises the question whether it is better to be loved more than feared, or feared more than loved."*

He answers:

*"The reply is, that one ought to be both feared and loved, but as it is difficult for the two to go together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one of the two has to be wanting."*

Machiavelli then argues for his answer. He makes several observations about human nature and uses these to demonstrate why his advice is sound. He gives more detail as to how one should make himself feared. He then cites Hannibal and Scipio as examples to support his case.

On the whole, each of Machiavelli's positions are well argued. *The Prince* does however suffer from a few deficiencies. First, having been written in the sixteenth century, the examination of possible forms of government does not include the many developed in the ensuing four hundred years. Next, when Machiavelli considers warfare, he is again writing from the position of the sixteenth century. Four hundred years of evolution in warfare weaken his defense of his advice in this area. Third, by necessity, all of Machiavelli's examples are drawn from events prior the sixteenth century. It would be

interesting to examine the four hundred years of history since Machiavelli and see if his advice is still supported by example.

Despite these deficiencies, *The Prince* contains much advice that is sound and worthwhile. The advice is widely applicable, i.e., it is useful in any situation where one must lead whether or not it is concerned with government. There are a handful of very insightful lines worth extracting:

Chapter 3 - *For it must be noted, that men must either be caressed or else annihilated; they will revenge themselves for small injuries, but cannot do so for great ones; the injury therefore that we do to a man must be such that we need not fear his vengeance.*

Chapter 3 - *for knowing afar off (which it is only given to a prudent man to do) the evils that are brewing, they are easily cured.*

Chapter 3 - *...the Romans...knew that war is not to be avoided, and can be deferred only to the advantage of the other side...*

Chapter 6 - *...a prudent man should always follow in the path trodden by great men and imitate those who are most excellent...*

Chapter 7 - *...he who does not lay his foundations beforehand may by great abilities do so afterwards, although with great trouble to the architect and to the building.*

Chapter 8 - *For injuries should be done all together, so that being less tasted, they will give less offence. Benefits should be granted little by little, so that they may be better enjoyed.*

Chapter 9 - *And as men, who receive good from whom they expected evil, feel under greater obligation to their benefactor...*

Chapter 9 - *Therefore a wise prince will seek means by which his subjects will always and in every possible condition of things have need of his government, and then they will always be faithful to him.*

Chapter 14 - *...the prince ought to read history and study the actions of eminent men...*

Chapter 15 - *...for how we live is so far removed from how we ought to live, that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather learn to bring about his own ruin than his preservation.*

Chapter 17 - *I conclude, therefore, with regard to being feared and loved, that men love at their own free will, but fear at the will of the prince, and that a wise prince must rely on what is in his power and not on what is in the power of others, and he must only contrive to avoid incurring hatred, as has been explained.*

Chapter 18 - *A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.*

Chapter 19 - *...princes should let the carrying out of unpopular duties devolve on others, and bestow favors themselves.*

Chapter 22 - *The first impression that one gets of a ruler and of his brains is from seeing the men that he has around him.*