

MACHIAVELLI'S VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

In *The Prince* Niccolo Machiavelli presents a view of governing a state that is drastically different from that of humanists of his time. Machiavelli believes the ruling Prince should be the sole authority determining every aspect of the state and put in effect a policy which would serve his best interests. These interests were gaining, maintaining, and expanding his political power.¹ His understanding of human nature was a complete contradiction of what humanists believed and taught. Machiavelli strongly promoted a secular society and felt morality was not necessary but in fact stood in the way of an effectively governed principality.² Though in some cases Machiavelli's suggestions seem harsh and immoral one must remember that these views were derived out of concern Italy's unstable political condition.³

Though humanists of Machiavelli's time believed that an individual had much to offer to the well being of the state, Machiavelli was quick to mock human nature. Humanists believed that "An individual only 'grows to maturity- both intellectually and morally- through participation' in the life of the state."⁴ Machiavelli generally distrusted citizens, stating that "...in time of adversity, when the state is in need of it's citizens there are few to be found."⁵ Machiavelli further goes on to question the loyalty of the citizens and advises the Prince that "...because men a wretched creatures who would not keep their word to you, you need keep your word to them."⁶ However, Machiavelli did not feel that a Prince should mistreat the citizens. This suggestion once again to serve the Prince's best interests.

If a prince can not be both feared and loved, Machiavelli suggests, it would be better for him to be feared by the citizens within his own principality. He makes the generalization that men are, "...ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit; while you treat them well they are yours."⁷ He characterizes men as being self centered and not willing to act in the best interest of the state, "[and when the prince] is in danger they turn against [him]."⁸ Machiavelli reinforces the prince's need to be feared by stating:

Men worry less about doing an injury to one who makes himself loved than to one who makes himself feared. The bond of love is one which men, wretched creatures they are, break when it is to their advantage to do so; but fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective.⁹

In order to win honor, Machiavelli suggests that a prince must be readily willing to deceive the citizens. One way is to "...show his esteem for talent actively encouraging the able and honouring those who excel in their professions...so that they can go peaceably about their business."¹⁰ By encouraging citizens to excel at their professions he would also be encouraging them to "...increase the prosperity of the their state."¹¹ These measures, though carried out in deception, would bring the prince honor and trust amongst the citizens, especially those who were in the best positions to oppose him.

Machiavelli postulates that a prince must also deceive those who attempt to flatter him.

[In] choosing wise men for his government and allowing those the freedom to speak the truth to him, and then only concerning matters on which he asks their opinion, and nothing else. But he should also question them toughly and listen to what they

say; then he should make up his own mind.¹²

Since each person will only advise the prince in accord to his own interests, the prince must act on his own accord. Machiavelli discourages action to taken otherwise "...since men will always do badly by [the prince] unless they are forced to be virtuous."¹³

Machiavelli actively promoted a secular form of politics. He laid aside the Medieval conception "of the state as a necessary creation for humankind's spiritual, material, and social well-being."¹⁴ In such a state, "[a] ruler was justified in his exercise of political power only if it contributed to the common good of the people he served, [and] the ethical side of a prince's activity...ought to [be] based on Christian moral principles...."¹⁵ Machiavelli believed a secular form of government to be a more realistic type. His views were to the benefit of the prince, in helping him maintain power rather than to serve to the well being of the citizens. Machiavelli promoted his belief by stating:

The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among those who are not virtuous. Therefore, if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must learn not to be so virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need.¹⁶

Machiavelli's was that, "God does not want to do everything Himself, and take away from us our free will and our share of glory which belongs us."¹⁷

Having studied and experienced Italy's political situation, Machiavelli derived these views. He felt that his suggestions would provide a frame work for a future prince of Italy to bring about political stability. Machiavelli writes:

Italy is waiting to see who can be the one to heal her wounds, put an end to the sacking of Lombardy, to extortion in the Kingdom and in Tuscany, and cleanse those sores which have been festering so long. See how Italy beseeches God to send someone to save her from those barbarous cruelties and outrages; see how eager and willing the country is to follow a banner, if someone will raise it.¹⁸

Although Italy had become the center of intellectual, artistic and cultural development, Machiavelli did not feel these qualities would help in securing Italy's political future. His opinion was that Italy required a leader who could have complete control over Italy's citizens and institutions. One way of maintaining control was to institute a secular form of government. This would allow the prince to govern without being morally bound. Machiavelli's view of human nature was not in accord to that of humanists who felt that an individual could greatly contribute to the well being of the society. Machiavelli, however felt that people generally tended to work for their own best interests and gave little obligation to the well being of the state. Although Machiavelli doubted that this form of government could ever be established it did appear several years after he wrote *The Prince*. Machiavelli has become to be regarded as "the founder of modern day, secular politics."¹⁹

