

Machiavelli: The Prince

Generals Study Guide

The key contribution:

- First work which “divorces political morality from Christian ethics” (Strauss)
- First book in which politics is carried on for its own sake, unlimited by anything above it; M. is the first to argue that politics should have its own rules, with the object being to win or prevail over others. “Moral rules do not exist not made by men, which men must abide by.” “Whatever is necessary may be called just and reasonable.” (Mansfield)

Other important points:

- The state is founded on fear of the prince, with order as its end. “Since nature or god does not support human justice, men are in need of a remedy; and the remedy is the prince.” (Mansfield)
- Politics is and should be concerned with what is, not what ‘ought’ to be (e.g. the first political scientist claim). “Goals of political life are not the perfection of man but the lower goals actually pursued by most men and most societies most of the time” “His intention is, on the basis of knowledge of how men do live, to teach princes how they ought to rule and even how they ought to live.” (Strauss & Cropsey)

Human nature: dismal, but redeemable. One can devise and teach rules for political behavior which will help man overcome its nature and live in order.

Mansfield: Characteristics of the successful prince:

- Rises from private or unprivileged status, owing nothing to anyone
- Is able to “learn to be able not to be good”
- Makes his own foundations, usually in the support of the people
- Has his own arms – does not rely on mercenaries. Mansfield: “It is quite unreasonable for one who is armed to obey one who is unarmed – so much for rule of the wise.”
- Is his own master; is not slave to God. Uses religion for his own purposes.

Virtu vs. Corruption:

Virtue: above all, the ability to pursue whatever course of action is necessary to achieve one’s political objectives. The cause (and effect) of the success of the state. Mansfield: virtue is meaningful only in the presence of opposites. Virtue is as it takes effect.

Corruption: the cause of the state’s downfall. Corruption cannot be held at bay. But it can be slowed, through a) rejuvenation of political institutions; b) ruthless punishment of evildoers; c) rewards/honors for good citizens; d) civic consciousness and obedience to laws. (this last bit does not come out so clearly in Prince)

Comparative methodology: studies past and present behavior, because human behavior is constant. By looking at parallel problems from the past, he can analyze the success and failure of certain courses of action and draw conclusions for the present.

Chapter Summaries

Chapters 1-11: Kinds of Principalities

Chapters 12-14: Kinds of Armies

Chapters 15-19: Qualities necessary in a Prince

Chapters 20-24: General advice to the Prince

Chapters 24-26: How men can make their own world

I. How Many are the Kinds of Principalities and in What Modes They are Acquired

All states are Republics or Principalities. Principalities are hereditary or new. New are altogether new or added to hereditary state. Dominions are either accustomed to living under a prince or used to being free; Acquired either with the arms or others or with one’s own, by fortune or by virtue.

II. Of Hereditary Principalities

Not discussed in this work. Notes that they are generally easy to maintain

III. Of Mixed Principalities

New principalities that are like ‘added members’ are easily acquired (b/c “men willingly change their lords in the belief that they will fare better”), but difficult to maintain (b/c the necessities which accompany acquisition force one to offend – or at least, one cannot satisfy as expected those who assisted). “For even though one may have the strongest of armies, he always needs the support of the inhabitants of a province in order to enter it.” States which are not used to living free can be held with ease if the bloodline of the old prince is eliminated and the laws and taxes are not altered. But acquiring a state with disparate cultures and languages is much more difficult; to hold, you must go live there in person to remedy disorders as soon as they arise. Alternatively, send colonies. “For this has to be noted: that men should either be caressed or eliminated, because they avenge themselves for slight offenses but cannot do so for grave ones; so the offense to a man should be such that one does not fear revenge for it.” [Note on preventive war: “war may not be avoided but is deferred to the advantage of others”]. Also: “Truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire, and always, when men do it who can, they will be praised or not blamed; but when they cannot, and wish to do it anyway, here lie the error and the blame.” And: “...one may draw a general rule that rarely or never fails: whoever is the cause of someone’s becoming powerful is ruined; for that power has been caused by him either with industry or with force, and both the one and the other of these two are suspect to whoever has become powerful.”

IV. Why the Kingdom of Darius Which Alexander Seized Did Not Rebel from His Successors after Alexander’s Death

Two types of governments are found in principalities:

- A prince plus ministers, etc. who rule by the prince’s favor
- A prince plus an aristocratic class not controlled by the prince

The first type is difficult to acquire (the ruling class’s condition is tied to the prince, so they will fight to keep him in power) but easy to maintain (just install people loyal to oneself)

The second type is easy to acquire (can always find a disgruntled aristo to help you) but difficult to maintain (have an independent class to manage who will always be searching for a better deal)

V. How Cities or Principalities Which Lived By Their Own Laws Before They were occupied should be administered

Three ways to hold states which previously enjoyed liberty:

- Ruin them
- Go live their personally
- Let them continue as they are and simply take tribute from them

Only the first method is secure: “Whatever one does or provides for, unless the inhabitants are broken up or dispersed, they will not forget that name and those orders, and will immediately recur to them upon any accident...”

If the city/principality lived previously under a prince, it will be easy to hold because it is used to obeying, and the old prince will be gone. But “in a Republic, there is greater life, greater hatred, more desire for revenge, the memory of their ancient liberty does not and cannot let them rest, so that the most secure path is to eliminate them or live in them.”

VI. Of new principalities that are acquired through one’s own arms and virtue

The ‘new modes and orders’ chapter. Altogether new principalities can be difficult to acquire/maintain; it all depends on the virtue of the aggressor. “The difficulties they have in acquiring their principalities arise in part from the new orders and modes they are forced to introduce so as to found their state and their security. And it should be considered that nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders. For the introducer has all those who benefit from the old orders as enemies, and lukewarm defenders in all those who might benefit from the new orders.”

“For...the nature of peoples is variable; and it is easy to persuade them of something, but difficult to keep them in that persuasion. And thus things must be ordered in such a mode that when they no longer believe, one can make them believe by force.”

VII. Of new principalities that are acquired by other’s arms and fortune

Becoming a prince solely by fortune is little trouble, but very hard to maintain, because he doesn’t know how to command and does not have reliable, loyal forces. Unless the prince has so much virtue that he can immediately

secure what fortune has given him – like Cesare Borgia’s conquering of Romagna (the lieutenant sliced in half in the square story), who “should be put forward to be imitated by all.”

VIII. Of those who have attained a principality through crimes

The “cruelty well used” chapter. One can obtain a principality without virtue or fortune, through ‘cruelties well used’: e.g., those which are done quickly and out of necessity, then turned to the good of the subjects.

IX. Of the Civil principality

The civil principality occurs when a private citizen becomes prince with the support of his fellow citizens. Can win with either the support of the people, or the support of the great. Better to do so with the support of the people, because 1) they desire only not to be oppressed; 2) if dependent upon the support of the great, one is surrounded by wanna-be equals challenging one’s rule; 3) it is difficult to serve against a hostile people, as their numbers are too great; 4) the worst one has to fear from the people is abandonment; from the great, rebellion. That being said, if one does come to power with support of the great, it is important to win over the people ASAP. But make sure that the people will be faithful to you during the difficult times by making them need you somehow, as people are fickle.

X. In what mode the forces of all principalities should be measured

Look at “whether a prince has enough of a state that he can rule by himself when he needs to, or whether he is always under the necessity of being defended by others.” ‘Ruling by oneself’ means having sufficient money and men to be able to fight battles against those who come to attack.

XI. Of ecclesiastical principalities

All the difficulties in Ecc. Princ. come in obtaining possession; they are maintained with neither virtue nor fortune.

XII. How many kinds of military there are and concerning mercenary soldiers

The principle foundations of all states are good laws and good arms. One cannot have good laws without good arms. There are three types of arms: 1) one’s own; 2) mercenary; 3) mixed. 2 & 3 are ‘useless and dangerous’. A small stipend is not sufficient to get men to die for you.

XIII. Of auxiliary, mixed, and one’s own soldiers

Auxiliary arms are harmful. When they lose for you, you are undone; when they win, you are beholden. The wise prince always uses his own arms. Without its own arms, no principality is secure.

XIV. What a prince should do regarding the military

Prince should have no other object than the art of war, in both peacetime and wartime. One who is armed will never obey one who is unarmed. The prince should think constantly of the terrain, invasion routes, etc. and read military histories.

XV. Of those things for which men and especially princes are praised or blamed

The slam at the ancients. Since intends to write something useful, must go immediately to the truth of the matter. “And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity.” Gives a list of apparent ‘virtues’ and ‘vices’: “if one considers everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one’s ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if pursued results in one’s security and well-being.”

XVI. Of liberality and parsimony

Liberality can lead to being hated, as being liberal usually involves burdening the people (taxes, etc.). Also difficult to draw back from. The smart prince doesn’t care about a reputation for meanness – “one of those vices which enable him to rule”. “In time, he will always be held more and more liberal when it is seen that with his parsimony his income is enough for him, that he can defend himself from whoever makes way on him, and that he can undertake campaigns w/o burdening the people.”

XVII. Of cruelty and mercy, and whether it is better to be loved than feared

Ideally, one would be both, but it is rarely possible. Therefore, rather be feared. “Men have less hesitation to offend one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared; for love is held by a chain of obligation, which, because men are wicked, is broken at every opportunity for their own utility, but fear is held by a dread of punishment that never forsakes you.”

But make sure one does it in a way that doesn't leave you hated – in particular, abstain from other's property, because “men forget the death of a father more quickly than the loss of a patrimony”. “Since men love at their convenience and fear at the convenience of the prince, a wise prince should found himself on what is his, not on what is someone else's.”

XVIII. In what mode faith should be kept by princes

Lion and the fox chapter. 2 types of combat: with laws and with force. One is for man, one is for the beast.

Necessary for a prince to know how to use both. Must know the fox and the lion – the fox to recognize the snares, and the lion to fight the wolves.

A prudent prince knows when not to keep his faith. “So let a prince win and maintain his state; the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone.”

XIX. Of avoiding contempt and hatred

What will make a prince hated more than anything is to be a usurper of property. Prince should have two fears – of subjects and of external powers. Defend oneself from latter with good arms and good friends (and if one has good arms, one will always have good friends). Things inside will be steady when things outside are steady, unless there are conspiracies. But if prince loved by people, will be no conspiracies. Hatred acquired through good deeds as well as bad deeds.

XX. Whether fortresses and many other things which are made and done by princes every day are useful or useless

XXI. What a prince should do to be held in esteem

Be a true friend and a true enemy. Not most useful to remain neutral: declare yourself and wage open war. Never associate yourself with someone more powerful than yourself so as to attack others. When you win, you are left his prisoner. Good prince should give recognition to virtuous men in his principality, giving rewards to those who excel at their pursuits.

XXII. Of those whom princes have as secretaries

Three kinds of brains: 1) those which understand by themselves; 2) those which discerns what others understand; 3) those which understand neither by themselves nor through others. The first is most excellent; the second, excellent; the third, useless. Good minister thinks not of himself but only of the prince; wise prince rewards his ministers well.

XXIII. In what mode flatterers are to be avoided

The wise prince makes clear to his subordinates that he wants always to hear the truth; but when everyone can tell you the truth, they lose reverence for you. Thus, pick out a group of wise men and make clear that the more truthful they are, the more accepted they will be. Prince should always take counsel, but when he wants it not when others want it. “A prince who is not wise by himself cannot be counseled well, unless indeed by chance he should submit himself to one alone to govern him in everything, who is a very prudent man.”

XXIV. Why the Princes of Italy have lost their states

XXV. How much fortune can do in human affairs, and in what mode it may be opposed

Fortune is arbiter of half our actions, the other half we govern. Prince can be happy today and ruined tomorrow without any change in character, because a prince who leans entirely on fortune will be ruined as it varies. One is happy when one adopts one's mode of proceeding to the times, and unhappy when mode does not fit the times. Flexibility is key.

XXVI. Exhortation to seize Italy and to free her from the barbarians