

Machiavelli: Good or Evil?

By

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Shortly after the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, David Ignatius, a columnist for the New Orleans Advocate, wrote an editorial comparing the President-Elect to Niccolò Machiavelli, a 16th century Italian author/historian, whom he claims supported certain political tactics such as lying and bullying, and had a “voracious sexual appetite.” These characteristics, Ignatius claimed, derived from Machiavelli’s concept of “virtue!!!”

Well, let me recite some of the facts about Machiavelli that I learned while I was a student at the University of Florence (Machiavelli’s home city) in the mid-20th century! Professor Paolo Treves, one of the leading experts on Machiavelli at the time, and using a text titled “Il Ragione di Stato” (The Reason of State) by Friedrich Meinecke, gave a totally different picture of Machiavelli than this somewhat traditional “evil” description of him as presented by David Ignatius.

For one thing, Machiavelli’s concept of “Virtu`” had little to do with the traditional philosophical/religious belief in “virtue” (arête in Greek). Derived from the term “vir” or “man,” the word in his time meant “strength” or “manly power:” the ability to see one’s goals through to the end! A Prince with such power Machiavelli believed, might use unusual tactics to achieve his goals, especially when faced with overwhelming opposition by enemy forces and/or rivals.

The notion of “Reason of State”, therefore, claimed the authors cited above, referred to “Logic:” what a Prince might have to do to retain his position when guided by Reason alone rather than by religious beliefs or what we might today call “civilized” values.

Also, Machiavelli never said something he is frequently accused of saying: “The End Justifies the Means.” For one thing, he never used the term “justify” in this context since his rationality was not based on morality but on---let’s say it again---Logic! If that offends one’s notion of a “good” Prince or political leader, so be it. That was not his intention. Rather he was stating the facts as he saw them, and as political scientists in the latter half of the 20th century were defining as “Policy Science.” In other words, he was an “a-moralist,” not an “immoralist”---a political engineer, so to speak.

What Machiavelli in this context did say was: when people examine the actions of a Prince they tend to allocate praise or blame by “looking at the outcome” (“si guarda al fine”), thereby separating the “is” from the “ought!”

So, let’s look at some of the statements Machiavelli made in context that might further clarify this evaluation:

“...in the question whether it is better to be loved rather than feared, or feared rather than loved...it might be answered that we should wish to be both; but since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is safer to be feared than loved”.

“...a Prince should inspire fear in such a fashion that, if he do not win love he may escape hate....(Since) his being loved depends upon his subjects, while his being feared depends upon himself, a wise Prince should build on what is his own, and not on what rests with others. Only,.. he must do his utmost to escape hatred.”

“...there are two ways of contending, one in accordance with the laws, the other by force; the first of which is proper to men, the second to beasts. But since the first method is often ineffectual, it becomes necessary to resort to the second... (Since) a Prince should know how to use a beast’s nature wisely, he ought of beasts to choose the lion and the fox; for the lion cannot guard himself from the snares, nor the fox from wolves. He must therefore be a fox to discern the snares, and a lion to drive off wolves....(He) who was best known to play the fox has had the best results”

“...it is needful that (a Prince) have a mind so disposed that he can turn as the winds of Fortune (chance) and the variations of things command him.”

“...in order that our free will not be extinguished, I judge that it could be true that Fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, and that she lets the other half, or nearly that, be governed by us...(She) demonstrates her power where there is no ordered virtue (virtu`, or “manly power”) to resist her.”

And again, as he said: “in the actions of all men, and most of all, of Princes...we look to results. Wherefore, if a Prince succeeds in establishing and maintaining his authority, the means will always be judged honorable and be approved by everyone.”

There we have it. As the renowned political philosopher, Benedetto Croce once said: “*La questione di Machiavelli, non si chiuderà mai!*” (The question of Machiavelli will never be closed!”)

So, does now-President Donald Trump warrant this kind of assessment as well? That’s not for me to judge. Not now, anyway! Like most of you (and Machiavelli), I’ll wait to see what happens (the results), and then judge!



Niccolo' Machiavelli: 1469-1527

