

Niccolò Machiavelli spent years studying how people gain power, keep power, and lose power. Then he lost his own position, was imprisoned and tortured, and found himself living outside the city whose government he had served. That experience gives his writing a particular weight. He understood the distance between being useful to powerful people and being protected by them. He knew that intelligence did not guarantee security, that years of service could be swept aside by a change in government, and that the people making decisions were not always the people who deserved to make them. Yet the man who emerged from those experiences was more complicated than the cold, scheming figure his name often brings to mind. He wrote about deception and violence, but also about freedom, public responsibility, and the danger of allowing a few powerful people to dominate everyone else. To understand him, we have to make room for all of that.

One of the most revealing glimpses of Machiavelli comes from a letter he wrote to his friend Francesco Vettori in December 1513. He described ordinary days in the countryside: attending to work on his property, talking with travelers, and playing games at an inn. In the evening, he returned home, changed out of his everyday clothes, and entered his study. There, through books, he imagined himself speaking with the great writers and leaders of the ancient world, asking why they had acted as they did. Reading temporarily released him from his worries about poverty and his own uncertain future. In that same letter, he mentioned a small work he had written about rulers: how they acquire their territories, how they keep them, and how they lose them. That work became *The Prince*. One of history's most famous books about power took shape while its author was struggling to find his way back into public life. (dhspritory.org)

Machiavelli was born in Florence on May 3, 1469. Florence is now a city in Italy, but the Italy of his lifetime was divided among separate governments. His father, Bernardo, had legal training, and the family had limited resources compared with Florence's great wealthy households. Books and education nevertheless mattered in the home. Machiavelli studied Latin, the language through which educated Europeans encountered many ancient Roman writers. His early education also included arithmetic. We know less about his youth than about his later government service, so we should resist filling the gaps with an invented story of a child who already understood politics. What we can say is that reading ancient history became central to his adult thinking. His marriage to Marietta Corsini in 1501 and their family life also remind us that the author of these severe political arguments had a household to support and practical reasons to worry about employment. ([Treccani](https://www.treccani.it))

To understand what shaped his mind, imagine living in a place where great artistic achievement existed alongside constant political danger. Machiavelli lived during the Renaissance, a period associated with renewed interest in ancient learning and extraordinary developments in art and literature. Yet beautiful buildings and brilliant paintings did not make governments secure. Florence, Venice, Milan, and other Italian powers competed with one another, while larger kingdoms, especially France and Spain,

intervened in Italian affairs. The pope also governed territory, which meant that the leadership of the Catholic Church had military and political interests as well as religious responsibilities. Agreements could change, armies could arrive, and a ruler who looked secure could suddenly be fleeing. Machiavelli's political writing grew out of that instability. When he asked what makes a government survive, he was addressing a question that people around him had urgent reasons to fear.

Florence itself gave him an education in the difference between the outward form of government and the actual location of power. The Medici were a wealthy banking family who exercised enormous influence over the city. Florence had a history of being a republic, meaning a political community governed through public offices and councils rather than simply treated as the inherited possession of a king. However, calling a place a republic does not mean that everyone has an equal voice. Wealth, family connections, and restrictions on political participation could place influence in relatively few hands. In 1494, the Medici were driven out, and Florence entered another period of republican government. The religious reformer Girolamo Savonarola became influential before his own downfall and execution in 1498. That same year, Machiavelli entered government service. He was stepping into a city that had recently seen how quickly both established families and commanding public personalities could fall.

His work helps explain why his books pay so much attention to practical details. In 1498, he became an official in Florence's second chancery, an office that handled government correspondence and administrative business. He also worked on matters involving diplomacy and defense. Diplomacy means managing relations between governments through discussion, negotiation, and representation. A diplomat has to listen carefully, assess what another government wants, and report what its promises are worth. Machiavelli traveled on missions, observed powerful figures, and sent reports to Florence. He was not a king or a general commanding Europe. He was an official trying to understand people who possessed more direct power than he did. When the Medici returned in 1512, he lost his position. In 1513, suspicion that he was involved in a conspiracy brought imprisonment and torture, followed by release. His government career had collapsed. (plato.stanford.edu)

One figure who had made a powerful impression on him during his diplomatic work was Cesare Borgia, the ambitious son of Pope Alexander VI. Borgia was trying to establish and strengthen control over territories in central Italy. Machiavelli watched a man who could move decisively, exploit opportunities, and remove obstacles with frightening ruthlessness. Yet Borgia's position depended heavily on circumstances he could not fully control, including his father's power. When the pope died and Cesare himself was seriously ill, his position deteriorated. This combination fascinated Machiavelli: here was someone with considerable ability whose achievements were still vulnerable to outside events. Borgia therefore becomes more than a simple example of successful ruthlessness in *The Prince*. His story allows Machiavelli to examine the uneasy relationship between personal skill and dependence on other people's strength. Being

clever does not make you independent, and looking powerful does not reveal how fragile the foundations beneath you may be. ([Project Gutenberg](#))

When Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, he was also hoping to regain employment. The book's dedication eventually addressed Lorenzo de' Medici, the younger Lorenzo, not the earlier Lorenzo known as "the Magnificent." This matters because it prevents us from turning the book into an abstract exercise written by someone with nothing personally at stake. Machiavelli wanted influential readers to recognize his knowledge. He had served a republic, and now he was presenting his understanding of government to a member of the family that had displaced it. Readers can reasonably see ambition, necessity, devotion to public affairs, and compromise meeting in that decision. His life does not divide neatly into pure principle on one side and simple opportunism on the other. Like many people whose livelihoods depend on institutions, he had to decide what he was willing to do when the people controlling those institutions changed.

The word prince in the book's title needs explanation. Here it means a ruler, not merely the son of a king. Machiavelli examines different kinds of rule, with particular attention to a person who has recently acquired power. An established ruler may benefit from habit: people are accustomed to the family, the offices, and the existing arrangements. A new ruler faces a different problem. Some people resent the change, others expect rewards, and those who helped bring the ruler to power may feel entitled to special treatment. Consider a modest modern comparison: a new director takes over an organization after promising reform. Employees who supported the change expect improvement, previous leaders defend their influence, and disappointed supporters may become critics. The consequences are far less violent than those Machiavelli studied, but the basic lesson travels: gaining a position and making that position stable require different kinds of work.

His most unsettling starting point is the gap between how people ought to behave and how they actually behave. We may believe leaders should be honest, generous, faithful to promises, and merciful. Machiavelli asks what happens when a leader follows those expectations while opponents lie, exploit weakness, and break agreements. In Chapter 15 of *The Prince*, he argues that a ruler needs the capacity to act against conventional goodness when circumstances require it. That is a serious moral claim, and we should feel its weight. He is questioning whether the standards used to judge a good private person always produce effective political leadership. However, recognizing a difficult problem does not settle his proposed answer. Once a ruler claims that wrongdoing is necessary, who checks that claim? Who decides whether the danger is real? Who protects the people asked to suffer for the ruler's supposed necessity? Those questions belong alongside his argument, not outside our reading of it. ([Project Gutenberg](#))

Two words help us understand much of his thinking, and they become straightforward once explained. The first is the Italian word *virtù*. It looks like the English word "virtue," but Machiavelli often uses it to mean the ability to act effectively: courage, judgment, energy, resourcefulness, and the capacity to respond to difficulty. A person can possess

these qualities without being morally admirable. The second word is *fortuna*, meaning fortune or the unpredictable conditions that affect our lives. A leader can prepare carefully and still encounter a sudden death, an invasion, or a shift in alliances. Machiavelli compares fortune to a dangerous river. When the river floods, it can overwhelm people; during quieter times, they can build defenses. His point is that preparation matters even though complete control is impossible. Applied to ordinary life, an emergency fund cannot prevent every hardship, but it can reduce the damage from some hardships. Preparation gives us room to act; it does not give us ownership of the future.

Machiavelli also notices that people often become attached to the very habits that once made them successful. Someone who advances through patience may continue waiting when quick action becomes necessary. Someone rewarded for boldness may keep taking risks after conditions begin demanding restraint. We frequently say that a person needs to “be consistent,” but consistency can become stubbornness when it prevents learning. Machiavelli wants us to pay attention to the relationship between a method and its circumstances. A method is not successful simply because it worked before. Imagine a business owner who built a loyal customer base through a neighborhood storefront. If the neighborhood changes, repeating the old approach more forcefully may accomplish little. The owner needs to understand what has changed. This is an everyday application of Machiavelli’s argument about adapting to the times; it is not a claim that he wrote a modern business manual. ([Project Gutenberg](#))

His discussion of love and fear is probably the most famous part of his work, and it is often repeated carelessly. In Chapter 17 of *The Prince*, he asks whether a ruler should be loved or feared. His first preference is to have both. When both cannot be secured, he says fear is the safer support. His reasoning is that affection depends partly on other people’s willingness to remain loyal, while fear of punishment can provide a more dependable restraint. But he also insists that a ruler should avoid becoming hated. For Machiavelli, hatred creates danger because people who feel deeply injured may become determined enemies. The distinction is important to understanding his argument, although it does not make the argument gentle. He is discussing real fear backed by a ruler’s power to punish. Replacing “fear” with the more comfortable word “respect” changes what he wrote.

We should also be careful about moving that teaching into settings where it does not belong. A parent, teacher, friend, or workplace supervisor who announces that Machiavelli proves fear is the best foundation for a relationship has skipped over enormous differences in purpose and circumstance. A ruler trying to survive violent political competition faces a different problem from a teacher helping a child develop confidence. Even within government, fear may silence warnings and hide resentment. A frightened person can appear obedient while withholding information that a leader needs. Machiavelli gives us an argument worth examining, not permission to stop examining consequences. A useful reading question is: What kind of behavior does this method produce immediately, and what kind of relationship does it create over time? Those can

be very different outcomes. Someone can obtain compliance today while steadily destroying the trust needed tomorrow.

His image of the fox and the lion makes a related point about power. A lion has strength, but strength alone does not protect it from traps. A fox detects traps, but cleverness alone may not protect it from stronger attackers. Machiavelli argues that a ruler needs both force and cunning. In the same chapter, he discusses circumstances in which rulers should break promises and emphasizes the usefulness of appearing faithful, humane, and religious. We should be clear about the severity of this teaching: he is allowing deception as a tool of rule. Yet the passage can also teach readers how to examine powerful people more carefully. A leader's appearance of goodness is not sufficient evidence of good conduct. A polished speech, a carefully arranged public gesture, or an impressive statement of values should be compared with decisions and results. The capacity to recognize a performance does not require us to become performers of the same deception. ([Project Gutenberg](#))

This brings us to the sentence most commonly attached to his name: "The ends justify the means." Machiavelli did not write that familiar sentence in *The Prince*. Nevertheless, simply correcting the quotation does not erase the disturbing substance of his work. He does sometimes defend actions ordinarily considered wrong when he believes they help establish or preserve political order. At the same time, he does not treat every successful seizure of power as worthy of admiration. Discussing the ancient ruler Agathocles, he distinguishes obtaining a state through terrible crimes from achieving glory. That distinction shows that success and honor are not completely interchangeable in his thinking. The difficulty is that his boundaries remain uncomfortable and open to dispute. He gives political survival tremendous weight, and readers are right to ask whether that weight can crush the moral limits meant to protect human beings.

One of his harshest examples concerns Cesare Borgia's treatment of a governor known as Remirro de Orco. In Machiavelli's account, Borgia gave this man authority to impose order in a troubled region. After the governor's severity generated resentment, Borgia had him publicly executed, presenting himself as the figure who removed the source of cruelty. Machiavelli draws attention to the political effect of this action. We should draw attention to the responsibility it attempts to conceal. The ruler had benefited from the harshness before separating his own reputation from it. Here we can see a pattern that reaches beyond that particular event: a powerful person delegates unpopular actions, receives their benefits, and later blames the subordinate who carried them out. Understanding the pattern helps us ask better questions about responsibility. Who authorized the conduct? Who gained from it? Why is accountability stopping at the person who followed the command? ([Project Gutenberg](#))

For all his attention to rulers, Machiavelli repeatedly recognizes that ordinary people matter. In Chapter 9 of *The Prince*, he distinguishes between the ambitions of powerful people who want to dominate and the desire of the broader population to avoid being dominated. That is a striking observation. People do not have to agree about everything

to share an interest in being protected from arbitrary mistreatment—meaning mistreatment that depends on someone’s unchecked wishes rather than fair rules. A ruler supported only by a narrow circle of influential families may become dependent on people who constantly demand more. Public support can provide a different foundation. This does not turn *The Prince* into a modern argument for equal voting rights. It does show that Machiavelli understands a political community contains competing interests, and that the comfort of its most powerful members cannot automatically stand in for the well-being of everyone.

His discussion of generosity provides another example of how he examines the hidden cost of an admired quality. Generosity sounds unquestionably good. But what happens when a ruler spends heavily to maintain a reputation for being generous, then raises taxes to cover the spending? People may end up paying for the very display intended to win their affection. Machiavelli argues that apparent stinginess can sometimes protect a ruler from imposing greater burdens later. The broader teaching is about following resources all the way through a decision. Imagine an organization that repeatedly announces impressive gifts while neglecting wages, maintenance, and its ability to keep operating. The announcement tells one story; the budget may tell another. This does not prove generosity is foolish. It teaches us to distinguish generosity that can be sustained from generosity financed by quietly transferring the cost to somebody else. ([Project Gutenberg](#))

His concern about military dependence follows a similar line of reasoning. Machiavelli strongly criticizes reliance on mercenaries, soldiers hired to fight for payment, and on troops supplied by another ruler. He worries that hired forces may lack commitment to the community they supposedly defend, while another ruler’s army may turn its assistance into control. In plain language, a government can discover that the force protecting it is also the force holding it hostage. He therefore places great importance on a community’s ability to defend itself. We do not have to accept every part of his military analysis to understand the underlying question: what happens when the people responsible for your survival have interests that differ from yours? That question can illuminate dependence in many settings, but we should avoid stretching the comparison too far. Paying someone for skilled work does not automatically make them unreliable. Machiavelli was addressing the particular dangers of military power.

He is equally concerned with the information reaching a ruler. In Chapter 23 of *The Prince*, he discusses flatterers: people who tell a powerful person what that person wants to hear. A leader surrounded by praise can lose contact with reality while feeling increasingly certain. Machiavelli recommends choosing wise advisers, encouraging truthful answers, listening carefully, and retaining responsibility for the final decision. His proposed arrangement is controlled; he is not describing a government in which everyone enjoys unrestricted freedom to criticize. Still, the problem he identifies is easy to recognize. Imagine a director who says, “Be honest with me,” but humiliates anyone who reports bad news. The invitation has little value because the punishment teaches the real rule. To understand a decision-maker’s relationship with truth, watch what happens

to the person who delivers unwelcome information. The quality of leadership depends partly on whether reality is allowed into the room. ([Project Gutenberg](#))

If we stopped with *The Prince*, however, we would leave a large part of Machiavelli's thinking unexplored. His *Discourses on Livy* studies the history of ancient Rome in order to ask how a republic can become strong and preserve its freedom. Livy was a Roman historian, and Machiavelli uses episodes from his work as starting points for political arguments. A discourse, in this title, is an extended discussion. Here the questions broaden beyond the survival of an individual ruler. How should public offices be arranged? How can ambitious citizens be restrained? What allows a community to endure after a capable leader dies? These questions direct our attention toward institutions, meaning the established rules, offices, and procedures through which people conduct public life. Courts, councils, and systems for selecting officials are examples. A society that depends entirely on the wisdom of one person faces a recurring problem: eventually, that person will be gone.

One of the most surprising arguments in the *Discourses* concerns disagreement. Many people assume that a healthy political community is one in which conflict disappears. Machiavelli argues that conflict between Rome's wealthy governing class and its common people helped produce arrangements that protected freedom. The common people's resistance contributed to the creation and importance of officials known as tribunes, who could defend their interests. His point is not that every quarrel improves a society. It is that complaints can reveal a real imbalance of power, and giving those complaints an organized public outlet can produce better protections. A quiet community may be peaceful, but it may also be a place where people are afraid to object. We need to ask how its quiet has been achieved. In Machiavelli's account, a republic can benefit when disagreement leads to laws and procedures that prevent one group from simply imposing its wishes on everyone else. ([gutenberg.org](#))

He also argues that people acting within a well-ordered system can show better judgment and greater steadiness than a single ruler. This does not mean he believes crowds are always wise. He recognizes that people can be misled by attractive promises. But he refuses to assume that placing authority in one person automatically removes foolishness or instability. A ruler can be vain, angry, frightened, or badly informed too. The fair comparison must consider the conditions under which people make decisions. Are there laws? Can claims be examined? Can errors be challenged? Are there ways to replace officials or hold them responsible? This is one reason Machiavelli's writing can speak to readers concerned about domination rather than interested in practicing it. He understands that freedom needs arrangements strong enough to survive the weaknesses of particular individuals. Depending on a leader's good intentions leaves everyone exposed when intentions change.

His treatment of public accusations adds another layer. Machiavelli supports lawful ways to accuse people of wrongdoing, while warning against destructive slander—claims that damage a person's reputation without a proper process for examining them. The

distinction matters because a community needs both accountability and protection against malicious accusation. If wrongdoing cannot be challenged through public procedures, grievances may move into private revenge and conspiracy. If anyone can ruin someone else through rumor, public life becomes poisoned by suspicion. The challenge is to make serious allegations answerable to evidence and judgment. We can recognize the relevance without pretending that Machiavelli designed our present legal systems. He is identifying a recurring political need: people must have a way to confront abuse that does not depend entirely on the goodwill of the accused or the uncontrolled anger of the accuser. (gutenberg.org)

For Machiavelli, a republic can also decay from within. Corruption, in this broader sense, includes more than taking a bribe. It involves the gradual bending of public life toward private advantage, until rules exist mainly for weaker people and influential figures expect exceptions. Offices become rewards for loyalty, wrongdoing becomes acceptable when committed by one's allies, and citizens lose confidence that public institutions serve a shared purpose. He also examines Rome's temporary emergency office of dictator. In the Roman arrangement he praises, this was an office with limits, created to meet a particular danger; the word did not carry precisely the same meaning it usually carries today. His attention falls on the difference between authority granted under established restrictions and power seized beyond them. That distinction asks a lasting question of every emergency measure: what prevents an exceptional power from becoming an ordinary privilege? (gutenberg.org)

Religion occupies another complicated place in his work. Machiavelli studies how shared religious beliefs, ceremonies, and obligations helped ancient Romans maintain public order and commitment. He also criticizes the political conduct of the Church in the Italy of his own time. These discussions examine religion's effects on collective life: what it encourages people to honor, what it asks them to sacrifice, and how leaders use it. They do not give us a simple, uncontested answer about everything he personally believed. We should be cautious about confidently assigning him a modern label such as atheist. What his writing does make clear is that he was willing to examine religious authority as part of political life. A religious title did not place a leader's actions beyond his scrutiny. Nor did a public performance of devotion prove, in his eyes, that the person performing it was honest. (gutenberg.org)

There are also limits to the freedom he imagines, and appreciating his insights should not hide them. His political world did not treat women as equal participants in government. The ancient republics he admired excluded many people, and Rome's growing strength included the conquest and subordination of other communities. A society can protect liberty for some while denying it to others. Machiavelli's admiration for Roman achievement therefore requires us to ask whose freedom is being measured and whose suffering is being left outside the picture. His historical examples also should not be mistaken for controlled experiments. He selected and interpreted stories to develop arguments; another reader might emphasize different causes or draw different lessons. His work is powerful because it provokes close examination, but its power does

not make every conclusion correct. We can learn from his observations while challenging both his assumptions and the human costs he accepts.

There was more to his writing life than political instruction. He wrote plays, poetry, military discussions, and history. His comedy *The Mandrake*, also known by its Italian title *Mandragola*, turns on sexual deception and the readiness of people to cooperate with wrongdoing when it serves their desires. Its humor is sharp and morally uncomfortable. It reveals his interest in people as creatures of appetite, vanity, self-justification, and imagination, not merely as pieces on a political board. His *The Art of War*, published in 1521, develops his military concerns; it is a different work from the much earlier Chinese book associated with Sun Tzu. His *Florentine Histories*, completed in 1525, returned to the city whose struggles had shaped his own career. He died in 1527. *The Prince* appeared in print in 1532, after his death, so he did not live to witness its long and often hostile international reputation. ([Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#))

That reputation eventually made his name into an adjective. Calling someone “Machiavellian” commonly suggests that the person is calculating, deceptive, and willing to use others to gain an advantage. The label captures a disturbing strand of his writing, but it leaves out his attention to public freedom, legal restraints, and the ambitions of powerful minorities. Readers have consequently disagreed about him for centuries. Some emphasize his willingness to permit evil actions; others emphasize his determination to describe political conduct honestly; others focus on his republican commitments. These interpretations are not all interchangeable, and the claim that *The Prince* is simply a disguised joke or trap should not be presented as settled fact. His writings contain real tensions. Understanding them requires the patience to stay with those tensions rather than selecting the version of Machiavelli that happens to flatter our own beliefs. ([plato.stanford.edu](#))

A thoughtful way to read him is to keep asking three questions as you move through an argument. What behavior is he observing? What action is he recommending? What moral cost does that recommendation carry? Those questions help separate an accurate observation from a questionable conclusion. He may correctly observe that people can be unfaithful without proving that every broken promise is wise. He may correctly observe that appearances influence the public without proving that deliberate deception is acceptable. He may correctly observe that emergencies demand action without proving that a leader should have unlimited authority. This approach gives us room to learn without surrendering judgment. We can also examine ourselves. When we praise a successful person, are we asking how the success was achieved? When our preferred leader bends a rule, do we notice? When someone says harm is necessary, do we ask who will bear it?

Machiavelli asks us to look closely at the machinery beneath public claims: the interests behind an alliance, the force behind a command, the dependence behind apparent strength, and the ambition beneath a display of virtue. His own life adds humility to that lesson. The man who explained political skill so forcefully could not secure the career he

wanted or protect himself from every reversal. He left us arguments forged through observation, disappointment, reading, and a persistent desire to participate in public life. We can meet those arguments with the same seriousness. We can become harder to deceive, more attentive to consequences, and more demanding of the people who exercise authority. And we can keep asking the question that every impressive account of power needs to face: what happens to the people who must live under it?