

The Appearance of Evil in Machiavelli's *The Prince*

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At one's first reading of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Machiavelli may seem to be a brilliant observer of politics or a pragmatic counselor, but inevitably his theory of politics seems evil. After several readings, one may convince himself that Machiavelli's book is only a satire on Italian politics or simply a hard-nosed description of how power is really used. But to his Renaissance contemporaries, not yet rendered cynical by twentieth-century totalitarianism, *The Prince* must have been nothing short of shocking. Whether or not Machiavelli thought of his political theory as evil, Machiavelli's *Prince* seems to teach evil, whatever its virtue may be. The question, then, is why Machiavelli wrote a book that on its face is evil.

The answer, in short, is that Machiavelli needed a job, and *The Prince* was his résumé. After the Medici returned to power in Florence in 1512, Machiavelli was turned out of his position as political advisor, imprisoned, and tortured. Released in 1513, Machiavelli sought a position with the new regime, because he needed both employment and proximity to power. In letters to several friends influential in the government of Florence, he asked for a position, listed his credentials as a political observer, and sketched out his political theories. When it became apparent that his friends could not or would not help him, Machiavelli appealed directly to the ruler of Florence, Giuliano de Medici. Developing the sketches in his letters into *The Prince*, Machiavelli sent it to Giuliano.

Reading *The Prince* as résumé helps explain why Machiavelli could so clearly advocate evil methods. First, by writing directly to the ruler of Florence, Machiavelli kept his work within a close circle of men who were acquainted with the method of Florentine politics and who could be expected not to be offended with his prescriptions. In fact, *The Prince* was not published until 1532, five years, after Machiavelli's death. Furthermore, when Machiavelli did give his political theory more publicly, as in *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*, it was much subtler, though no less evil. In *The*

Prince, he was writing to an established prince, and so could be blunt and concise; in the *Discourses* he was writing to potential princes and so had to be veiled and exhaustive.

Second, Machiavelli needed something both to distinguish himself as a political advisor and to show his suitability for service to the Medici. As an already established prince, Giuliano knew what Florentine politics were like. Men who acquired and maintained their power as the Medici had could have no use for political philosophers who would merely assert that private virtue was necessary for public success—unless to use them as public justifications for their reign. Writing to a man whose family had acquired the rule of Florence through the unscrupulous use of power politics, Machiavelli could frankly advise that the same use of power politics would maintain power. Machiavelli, on the other hand, offered a new political theory in which *virtú*—by no means synonymous with *virtue*—and personal ruthlessness and unscrupulousness were not forbidden but necessary and justified. Machiavelli hoped that *The Prince* might prove his familiarity with the rough-and-tumble of Florentine politics and that the Medici might elevate him for his clever justifications of his actions.

Third, Machiavelli used *The Prince* not only to justify the Medici but also to justify himself. Having been imprisoned for being on the wrong side when the Medici came to power and having been released only as part of a general clemency after the ascension of Leo X (Giovanni de Medici) to the papal throne, Machiavelli was certain that he was not trusted by the Medici. He therefore argued in chapter twenty that a prince was better off better putting trust in “men who, at the beginning of their rule, were considered suspect than in those who were trusted at first.” Machiavelli supports such a counterintuitive thesis by arguing that such men would be eager to prove themselves loyal in order to avoid the enmity of the prince and especially if they needed “support in order to maintain themselves.” Then in chapter twenty-two, Machiavelli argues that a prince can maintain the loyalty of his minister by “keeping him acting well, honouring him, making him rich, putting him in his debt, giving him a share of the honours and responsibilities; so that the minister recognizes that he cannot exist without the prince.” Essentially, Machiavelli announced that his loyalty was for sale. If he could

so easily announce his unscrupulousness to his hoped-for employer, he could see no reason to hide his true political theories.

Another reason that Machiavelli could advocate evil so transparently in *The Prince* was that he separated the means of his political theories from their suggested end. In the final chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli gives a stirring call to national unification. He describes Italy's unification in terms of redemption. For example, he writes that the unifier of Italy will be a redeemer like Moses, that one could "believe that God had ordained [Cesare Borgia] for Italy's redemption," that Giuliano (who became a cardinal) was "favoured by God and the church," and that Giuliano must become Italy's "redeemer." By packing all that messianic rhetoric into one chapter, he cleverly disassociates his ostensible goal from the means which he argues are necessary to achieve it. In other words, Machiavelli argues that the public good ought to be achieved even at the cost of private virtue. For though Machiavelli disassociates the two, he intends that his unvirtuous methods be the means of accomplishing his good. Indeed, the final chapter begins with the words "Therefore, considering all of the matters discussed above," thus explicitly tying the two together. Using this literary structure, therefore, Machiavelli separates his end from his means. And of course, his grand political end was subservient to his immediate end of getting a job.

Regardless of what conclusion one comes to about whether Machiavelli actually meant his work as evil, one cannot avoid the fact that it seems to be evil on its face. Machiavelli could write so transparently because of his audience and because of his literary structure. Machiavelli argued that the prince ought to be evil and yet seem to be good, but in a twisted parody, whatever its virtue may be, his *Prince* seems to be evil.