

Niccolò Machiavelli

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Niccolò Machiavelli

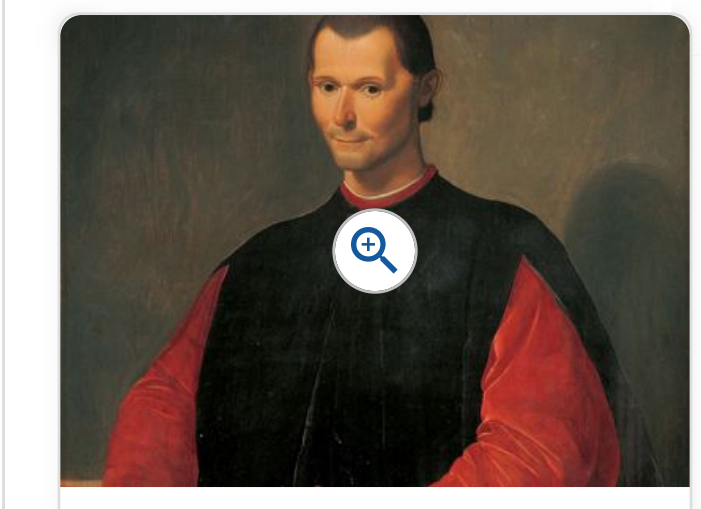
Italian statesman and writer

By Harvey Mansfield • Last Updated: Jan 5, 2023 • Article History

Top Questions

- Who was Niccolò Machiavelli?
- What did Niccolò Machiavelli write?
- What was Niccolò Machiavelli's occupation?

Summary
Read a brief summary of this topic



Niccolò Machiavelli

Born: May 3, 1469 • Florence • Italy
Died: June 21, 1527 (aged 58) • Florence • Italy

Notable Works: "Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy" • "Florentine Histories" • "On the L..."*(Show more)*

Subjects Of Study: Cesare Borgia • Germany • fortuna • republic • virtù

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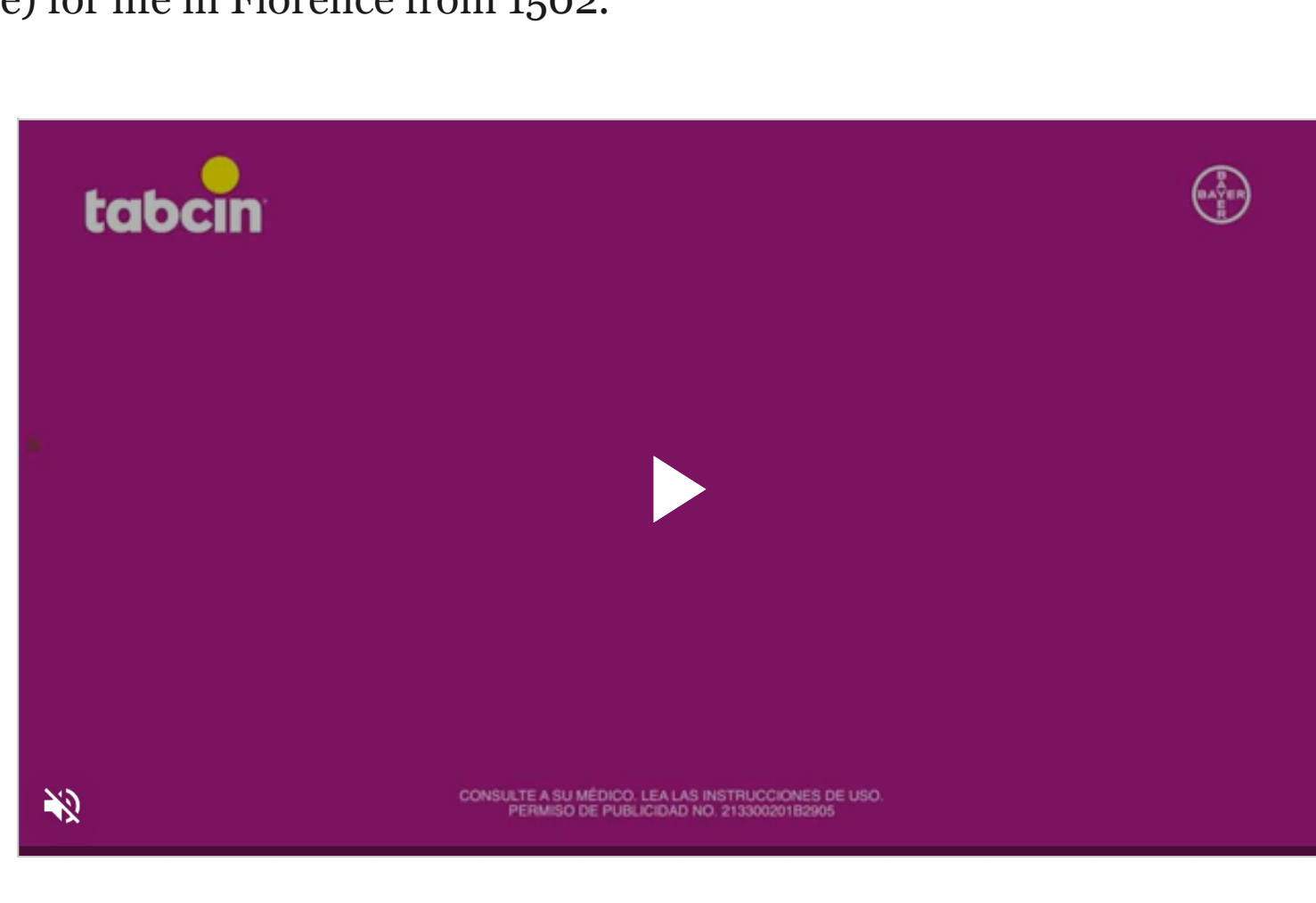
Niccolò Machiavelli, (born May 3, 1469, Florence [Italy]—died June 21, 1527, Florence), Italian Renaissance political philosopher and statesman, secretary of the Florentine republic, whose most famous work, *The Prince (Il Principe)*, brought him a reputation as an atheist and an immoral cynic.

Early life and political career

From the 13th century onward, Machiavelli's family was wealthy and prominent, holding on occasion Florence's most important offices. His father, Bernardo, a doctor of laws, was nevertheless among the family's poorest members. Barred from public office in Florence as an insolvent debtor, Bernardo lived frugally, administering his small landed property near the city and supplementing his meagre income from it with earnings from the restricted and almost clandestine exercise of his profession.

Bernardo kept a library in which Niccolò must have read, but little is known of Niccolò's education and early life in Florence, at that time a thriving centre of philosophy and a brilliant showcase of the arts. He attended lectures by Marcello Virgilio Adriani, who chaired the Studio Fiorentino. He learned Latin well and probably knew some Greek, and he seems to have acquired the typical humanist education that was expected of officials of the Florentine Chancery.

In a letter to a friend in 1498, Machiavelli writes of listening to the sermons of Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), a Dominican friar who moved to Florence in 1482 and in the 1490s attracted a party of popular supporters with his thinly veiled accusations against the government, the clergy, and the pope. Although Savonarola, who effectively ruled Florence for several years after 1494, was featured in *The Prince* (1513) as an example of an "unarmed prophet" who must fail, Machiavelli was impressed with his learning and rhetorical skill. On May 24, 1498, Savonarola was hanged as a heretic and his body burned in the public square. Several days later, emerging from obscurity at the age of 29, Machiavelli became head of the second chancery (*cancelleria*), a post that placed him in charge of the republic's foreign affairs in subject territories. How so young a man could be entrusted with so high an office remains a mystery, particularly because Machiavelli apparently never served an apprenticeship in the chancery. He held the post until 1512, having gained the confidence of Piero Soderini (1452–1522), the gonfalonier (chief magistrate) for life in Florence from 1502.



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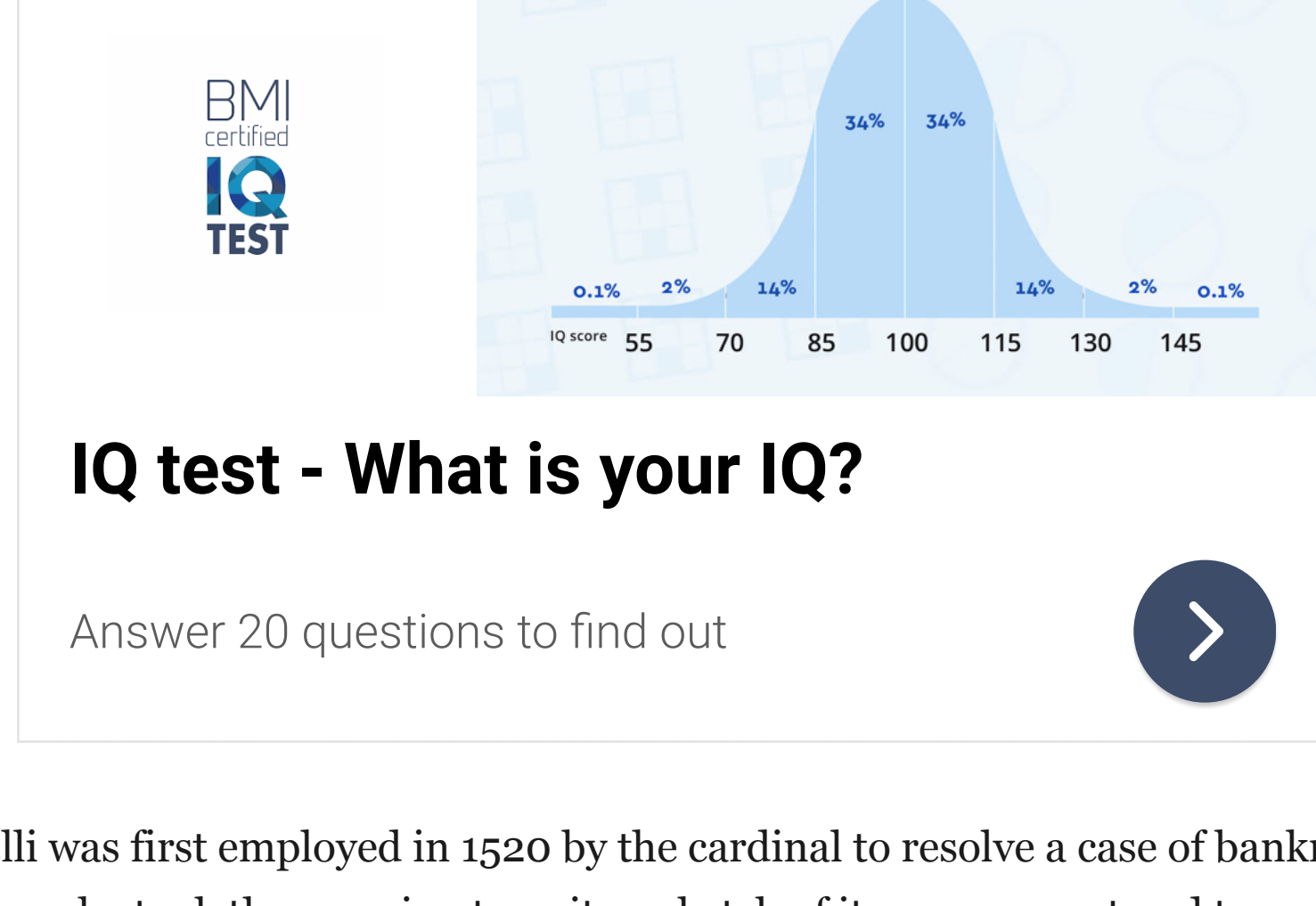
During his tenure at the second chancery, Machiavelli persuaded Soderini to reduce the city's reliance on mercenary forces by establishing a militia (1505), which Machiavelli subsequently organized. He also undertook diplomatic and military missions to the court of France; to Cesare Borgia (1475/76–1507), the son of Pope Alexander VI (reigned 1492–1503); to Pope Julius II (reigned 1503–13), Alexander's successor; to the court of Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (reigned 1493–1519); and to Pisa (1509 and 1511).

In 1503, one year after his missions to Cesare Borgia, Machiavelli wrote a short work, *Del modo di trattare i sudditi della Val di Chiana ribellati (On the Way to Deal with the Rebel Subjects of the Valdichiana)*. Anticipating his later *Discourses on Livy*, a commentary on the ancient Roman historian, in this work he contrasts the errors of Florence with the wisdom of the Romans and declares that in dealing with rebellious peoples one must either benefit them or eliminate them. Machiavelli also was a witness to the bloody *vinguance* taken by Cesare on his mutinous captains at the town of Sinigaglia (December 31, 1502), of which he wrote a famous account. In much of his early writings, Machiavelli argues that "one should not offend a prince and later put faith in him."

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In 1503 Machiavelli was sent to Rome for the duration of the conclave that elected Pope Julius II, an enemy of the Borgias, whose election Cesare had unwisely aided. Machiavelli watched Cesare's decline and, in a poem (*First Decennale*), celebrated his imprisonment, a burden that "he deserved as a rebel against Christ." Altogether, Machiavelli embarked on more than 40 diplomatic missions during his 14 years at the chancery.

In 1512 the Florentine republic was overthrown and the gonfalonier deposed by a Spanish army that Julius II had enlisted into his Holy League. The Medici family returned to rule Florence, and Machiavelli, suspected of conspiracy, was imprisoned, tortured, and sent into exile in 1513 to his father's small property in San Casciano, just south of Florence. There he wrote his two major works, *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*, both of which were published after his death. He dedicated *The Prince* to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici (1492–1519), ruler of Florence from 1513 and grandson of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92). When, on Lorenzo's death, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici (1478–1534) came to govern Florence, Machiavelli was presented to the cardinal by Lorenzo Strozzi (1488–1538), scion of one of Florence's wealthiest families, to whom he dedicated the dialogue *The Art of War* (1521; *Dell'arte della guerra*).



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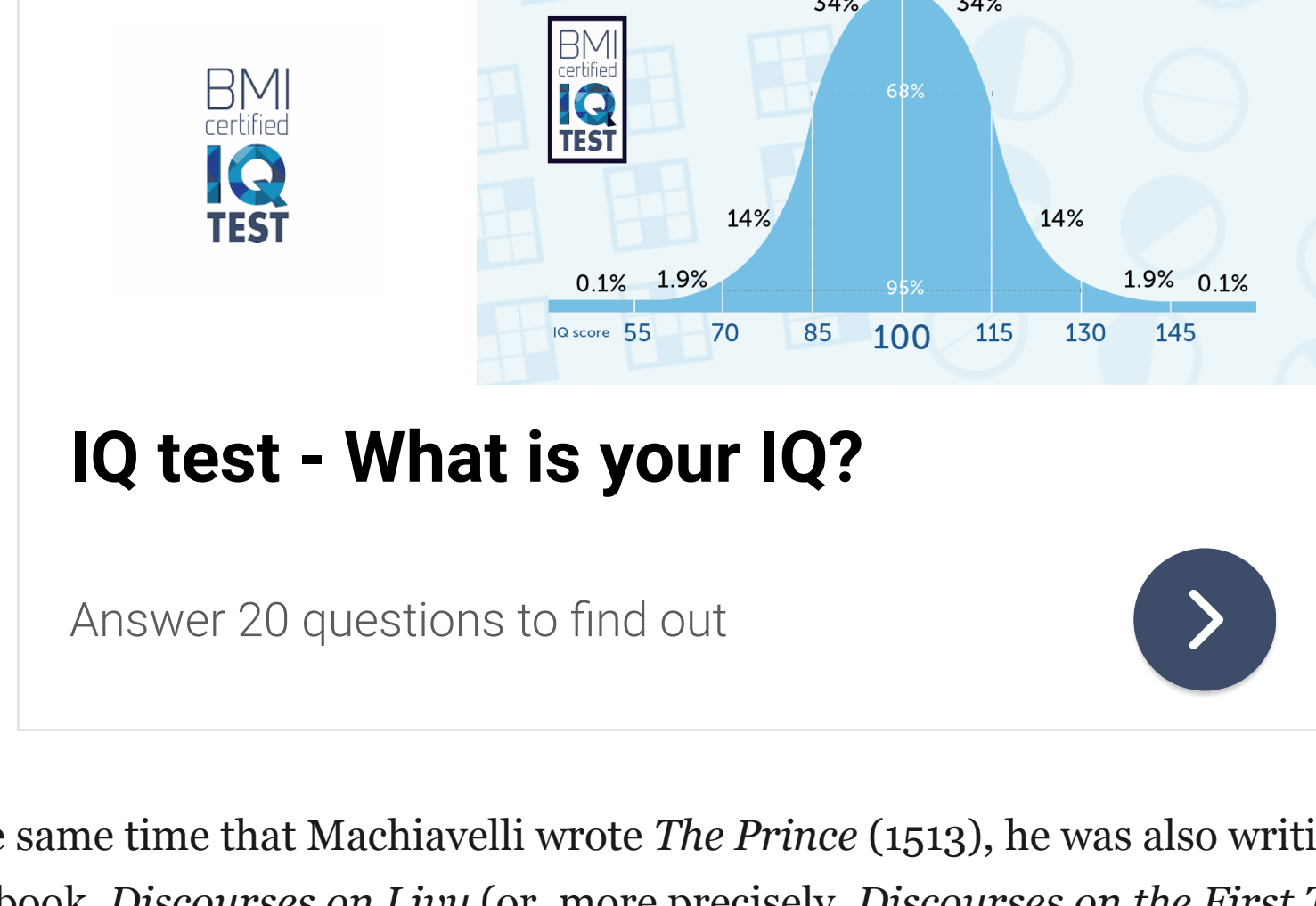
Answer 20 questions to find out

Machiavelli was first employed in 1520 by the cardinal to resolve a case of bankruptcy in Lucca, where he took the occasion to write a sketch of its government and to compose his *The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca* (1520; *La vita di Castruccio Castracani da Lucca*). Later that year the cardinal agreed to have Machiavelli elected official historian of the republic, a post to which he was appointed in November 1520 with a salary of 57 gold florins a year, later increased to 100. In the meantime, he was commissioned by the Medici pope Leo X (reigned 1513–21) to write a discourse on the organization of the government of Florence. Machiavelli criticized both the Medici regime and the succeeding republic he had served and boldly advised the pope to restore the republic, replacing the unstable mixture of republic and principality then prevailing. Shortly thereafter, in May 1521, he was sent for two weeks to the Franciscan chapter at Carpi, where he improved his ability to "reason about silence." Machiavelli faced a dilemma about how to tell the truth about the rise of the Medici in Florence without offending his Medici patron.

After the death of Pope Leo X in 1521, Cardinal Giulio, Florence's sole master, was inclined to reform the city's government and sought out the advice of Machiavelli, who replied with the proposal he had made to Leo X. In 1523, following the death of Pope Adrian VI, the cardinal became Pope Clement VII, and Machiavelli worked with renewed enthusiasm on an official history of Florence. In June 1525 he presented his *Florentine Histories (Istorie Fiorentine)* to the pope, receiving in return a gift of 120 ducats. In April 1526 Machiavelli was made chancellor of the Procuratori delle Mura to superintend Florence's fortifications. At this time the pope had formed a Holy League at Cognac against Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (reigned 1519–56), and Machiavelli went with the army to join his friend Francesco Guicciardini (1482–1540), the pope's lieutenant, with whom he remained until the sack of Rome by the emperor's forces brought the war to an end in May 1527. Now that Florence had cast off the Medici, Machiavelli hoped to be restored to his old post at the chancery. But the few favours that the Medici had doled out to him caused the supporters of the free republic to look upon him with suspicion. Denied the post, he fell ill and died within a month.

Writings

In office Machiavelli wrote a number of short political discourses and poems (the *Decennali*) on Florentine history. It was while he was out of office and in exile, however, that the "Florentine Secretary," as Machiavelli came to be called, wrote the works of political philosophy for which he is remembered. In his most noted letter (December 10, 1513), he described one of his days—in the morning walking in the woods, in the afternoon drinking and gambling with friends at the inn, and in the evening reading and reflecting in his study, where, he says, "I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for." In the same letter, Machiavelli remarks that he has just composed a little work on princes—a "whimsy"—and thus lightly introduces arguably the most famous book on politics ever written, the work that was to give the name Machiavellian to the teaching of worldly success through scheming deceit.



IQ test - What is your IQ?

Answer 20 questions to find out

About the same time that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* (1513), he was also writing a very different work, *The Discourses* (1513), which was the first of a series of works known as the *First Ten Books of Titus Livy (Discorsi sopra la prima decada di Tito Livio)*. Both books were first published only after Machiavelli's death, the *Discourses* on Livy in 1531 and *The Prince* in 1532. They are distinguished from his other works by the fact that in the dedicatory letter to each he says that it contains everything he knows. The dedication of the *Discourses* on Livy presents the work to two of Machiavelli's friends, who he says are not princes but deserve to be, and criticizes the work of begging letter he appears to have written in dedicating *The Prince*. The two works differ also in substance and manner. Whereas *The Prince* is mostly concerned with princes—particularly new princes—and is short, easy to read, and, according to many, dangerously wicked, the *Discourses on Livy* is a "reasoning" that is long, difficult, and full of advice on how to preserve republics. Every thoughtful treatment of Machiavelli has had to come to terms with the differences between his two most important works.

The Prince of Niccolò Machiavelli

The first and most persistent view of Machiavelli is that of a teacher of evil. The German-born American philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973) begins his interpretation from this point. *The Prince* is in the tradition of the "Mirror for Princes"—i.e., books of advice that enabled princes to see themselves as though reflected in a mirror—which began with the *Cyropaedia* by the Greek historian Xenophon (431–350 BC) and continued into the Middle Ages. Prior to Machiavelli, works in this genre advised princes to adopt the best prince as their model, but Machiavelli's version recommends that a prince go to the "effectual truth" of things and forgo the standard of "what should be done" lest he bring about his ruin. To maintain himself a prince must learn how not to be good and use or not use this knowledge "according to necessity." An observer would see such a prince as guided by necessity, and from this standpoint Machiavelli can be interpreted as the founder of modern political science, a discipline based on the actual state of the world as opposed to how the world might be, in utopias such as the Republic of Plato (428/27–348/47 BC) or the City of God of Saint Augustine (354–430). This second, amoral interpretation can be found in works by the German historian Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954) and the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945). The amoral interpretation fastens on Machiavelli's frequent resort to "necessity" in order to excuse actions that might otherwise be condemned as immoral. But Machiavelli also advises the use of prudence in particular circumstances, and, though he sometimes offers rules or remedies for princes to adopt, he does not seek to establish exact or universal laws of politics in the manner of modern political science.

Machiavelli divides principalities into those that are acquired and those that are inherited. In general, he argues that the more difficult it is to acquire control over a state, the easier it is to hold on to it. The reason for this is that the fear of a new prince is stronger than the love for a hereditary prince; hence, the new prince, who relies on "a dread of punishment that never forsakes you," will succeed, but a prince who expects his subjects to keep their promises of support will be disappointed. The prince will find that "each wants to die for him when death is at a distance," but, when the prince needs his subjects, they generally decline to serve as promised. Thus, every prince, whether new or old, must look upon himself as a new prince and learn to rely on "one's own arms," both literally in raising one's own army and metaphorically in not relying on the goodwill of others.

The new prince relies on his own virtue, but, if virtue is to enable him to acquire a state, it must have a new meaning distinct from the New Testament virtue of seeking peace. Machiavelli's notion of *virtù* requires the prince to be concerned foremost with the art of war and to seek not merely security but also glory, for glory is included in necessity. *Virtù* for Machiavelli is virtue not for its own sake but rather for the sake of the reputation it enables princes to acquire. Liberality, for example, does not aid a prince, because the recipients may not be grateful, and lavish displays necessitate taxing of the prince's subjects, who will despise him for it. Thus, a prince should not be concerned if he is held to be stingy, as this vice enables him to rule. Similarly, a prince should not care about being held cruel as long as the cruelty is "well used." Machiavelli sometimes uses *virtù* in the traditional sense too, as in a famous passage on Agathocles (361–289 BC), the self-styled king of Sicily, whom Machiavelli describes as a "most excellent captain" but one who came to power by criminal means. Of Agathocles, Machiavelli writes that "one cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy and without religion." Yet in the very next sentence he speaks of "the virtue of Agathocles," who did all these things. Virtue, according to Machiavelli, aims to reduce the power of fortune over human affairs because fortune keeps men from relying on themselves. At first Machiavelli admits that fortune rules half of men's lives, but then, in an infamous metaphor, he compares fortune to a woman who lets herself be won more by the impetuous and the young, "who command her with more audacity," than by those who proceed cautiously. Machiavelli cannot simply dismiss or replace the traditional notion of moral virtue, which gets its strength from the religious beliefs of ordinary people. His own virtue of mastery coexists with traditional moral virtue yet also makes use of it. A prince who possesses the virtue of mastery can command fortune and manage people to a degree never before thought possible.

In the last chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes a passionate exhortation to seize Italy and to free her from the barbarians—apparently France and Spain, which had been overrunning the disunited peninsula. He calls for a redeemer, mentioning the miracles that occurred as Moses led the Israelites to the promised land, and closes with a quotation from a patriotic poem by Petrarch (1304–74). The final chapter has led many to a third interpretation of Machiavelli as a patriot rather than as a disinterested scientist.

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