

Niccolò Machiavelli

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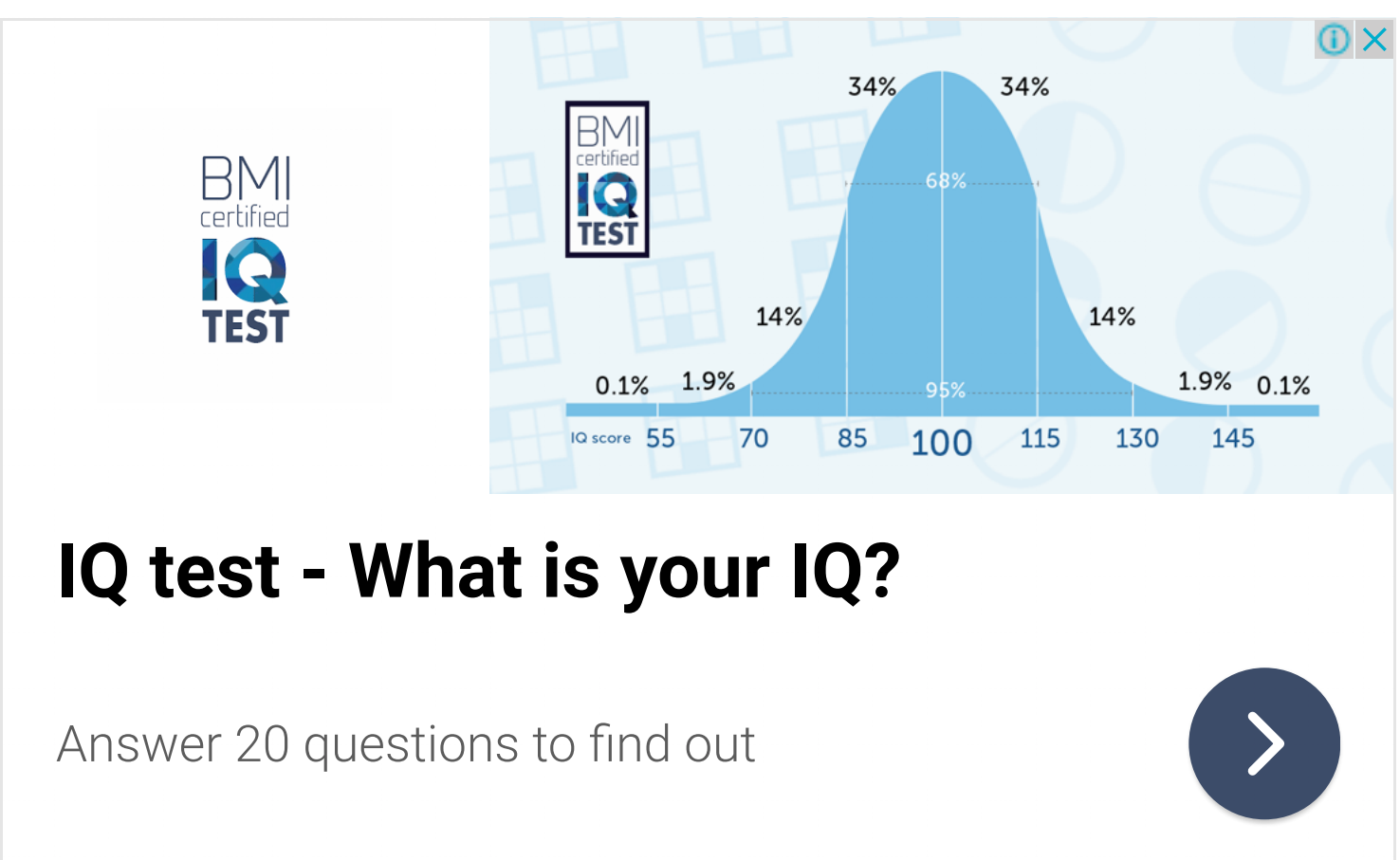
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The Prince of Niccolò Machiavelli

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.



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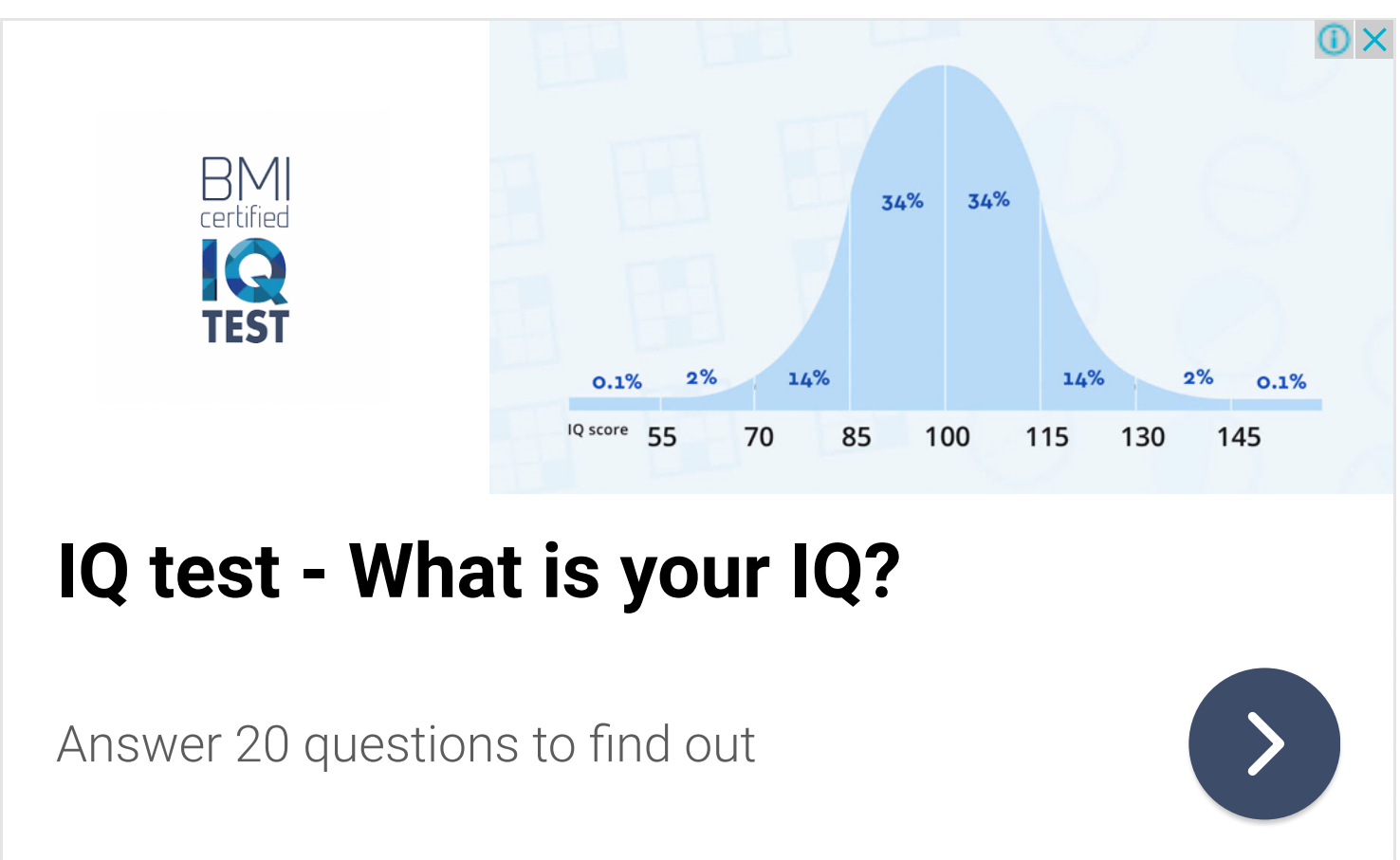
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In the last chapter of *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes a passionate “exhortation to seize **Italy** and to free her from the barbarians”—apparently France and Spain, which had been overrunning the disunited peninsula. He calls for a redeemer, mentioning 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.

The Discourses on Livy of Niccolò Machiavelli

Like *The Prince*, the *Discourses on Livy* admits of various interpretations. One view, elaborated separately in works by the political theorists J.G.A. Pocock and **Quentin Skinner** in the 1970s, stresses the work’s republicanism and locates Machiavelli in a republican tradition that starts with **Aristotle** (384–322 BC) and continues through the organization of the **medieval** city-states, the renewal of classical political **philosophy** in Renaissance **humanism**, and the establishment of the contemporary American **republic**. This interpretation focuses on Machiavelli’s various pro-republican remarks, such as his statement that the multitude is wiser and more constant than a prince and his emphasis in the *Discourses on Livy* on the republican virtue of self-sacrifice as a way of combating corruption. Yet Machiavelli’s republicanism does not rest on the usual republican **premise** that power is safer in the hands of many than it is in the hands of one. To the contrary, he asserts that, to found or reform a republic, it is necessary to “be alone.” Any ordering must depend on a single mind; thus, **Romulus** “deserves excuse” for killing Remus, his brother and partner in the founding of Rome, because it was for the **common good**. This statement is as close as Machiavelli ever came to saying “the end justifies the means,” a phrase closely associated with interpretations of *The Prince*.

Republics need the kind of leaders that Machiavelli describes in *The Prince*. These “princes in a republic” cannot govern in accordance with **justice**, because those who get what they deserve from them do not feel any **obligation**. Nor do those who are left alone feel grateful. Thus, a prince in a republic will have no “partisan friends” unless he learns “to kill the sons of Brutus,” using violence to make examples of enemies of the republic and, not incidentally, of himself. To reform a corrupt state presupposes a good man, but to become a prince presupposes a bad man. Good men, Machiavelli claims, will almost never get power, and bad men will almost never use power for a good end. Yet, since republics become corrupt when the people lose the fear that compels them to obey, the people must be led back to their original virtue by sensational executions reminding them of punishment and reviving their fear. The apparent solution to the problem is to let bad men gain glory through actions that have a good outcome, if not a good motive.



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In the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli favours the deeds of the ancients above their philosophy; he reproaches his contemporaries for consulting ancient jurists for political wisdom rather than looking to the actual **history** of Rome. He argues that the factional tumults of the Roman republic, which were condemned by many ancient writers, actually made Rome free and great. Moreover, although Machiavelli was a product of the Renaissance—and is often portrayed as its leading exponent (e.g., by 19th-century Swiss historian **Jacob Burckhardt**)—he also criticized it, particularly for the humanism it derived from **Plato**, Aristotle, and the Roman orator **Cicero** (106–43 BC). He called for “new modes and orders” and compared himself to the explorers of unknown lands in his time. His emphasis on the effectual truth led him to seek the hidden springs of politics in fraud and **conspiracy**; examples of which he discussed with apparent relish. It is notable that, in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, the longest chapters are on conspiracy.

Throughout his two chief works, Machiavelli sees politics as defined by the difference between the ancients and the moderns: the ancients are strong, the moderns weak. The moderns are weak because they have been formed by Christianity, and, in three places in the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli boldly and impudently criticizes the Roman Catholic church and **Christianity** itself. For Machiavelli the church is the cause of **Italy’s** disunity; the clergy is dishonest and leads people to believe “that it is evil to say evil of evil”; and Christianity **glorifies** suffering and makes the world effeminate. But Machiavelli leaves it unclear whether he prefers atheism, paganism, or a reformed Christianity, writing later, in a letter dated April 16, 1527 (only two months before his death): “I love my fatherland more than my soul.”

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The Florentine Histories

Machiavelli’s longest work—commissioned by Pope **Leo X** in 1520, presented to Pope **Clement VII** in 1525, and first published in 1532—is a history of **Florence** from its origin to the death of **Leonardo di Piero de’ Medici** in 1492. Adopting the approach of humanist historians before him, Machiavelli used the plural “histories,” dividing his account into “books” with nonhistorical introductions and invented speeches presented as if they were actual reports. His history, moreover, takes place in a nonhistorical context—a contest between virtue and fortune. The theme of the *Florentine Histories* is the city’s remarkable party division, which, unlike the divisions in **ancient Rome**, kept the city weak and corrupt. Like the *Discourses on Livy*, the *Florentine Histories* contains (less bold) **criticism** of the church and popes and revealing portraits of leading characters, especially of the Medici (the book is organized around the return of **Cosimo de’ Medici** [1389–1464] to Florence in 1434 after his exile). It also features an exaggeratedly “Machiavellian” oration by a **plebeian** leader, apparently Michele di Lando, who was head of the 1378 **Revolt of the Ciompi** (“wool carders”), a rebellion of Florence’s lower classes that resulted in the formation of the city’s most democratic (albeit short-lived) government. Although not a modern historian, Machiavelli, with his **emphasis** on “diverse effects,” exhibits some of the modern historian’s devotion to facts.

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