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Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*: An Overview

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Abstract:

Much has been talked about Niccolo Machiavelli and his treatise *The Prince*. While on one hand his ideals have been criticised and condemned by some of the reputed critics like that of Elizabeth English, Wynham Lewis, others held the view that Machiavelli's treatise *The Prince* had something extraordinary to contribute to the society.

The objective of my paper is to thoroughly analyse the conditions that compelled Machiavelli to write this exposition and in a way justify them. Paving its way through –with a brief historical background and a compendium to the essay *The Prince*, the paper also aims at providing a comparative study between Machiavellian ideals and the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle. The paper concludes with a brief account of Isaiah Berlin's commentary on Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

Keywords: *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli, Isaiah Berlin, Plato, Aristototle.

Historical Background

Having spent his childhood most peacefully, Niccolo Machiavelli, the great Italian philosopher witnessed Italy's state of decadence and intense political conflict in his adulthood. The then Italy was not a unified country rather, it was an accumulation of city-states, each with its own court and ruler, each of them attempting to addition control over the others. Italy was not only a place of domestic intrigue but also a battleground for the force-ravenous French, the Spanish, the Germans and the Catholic Church under the power of the popes. The main cities like that of Florence, Milan, Naples and Venice fought fire with fire in order to establish their control over Italy. Each of these forces endeavoured to seek after a system of playing the different powers off of one other, yet they likewise occupied with less fair practices, for example shakedown and savagery. The year 1494 saw the expulsion of the despotic family of Medici who had ruled Florence for decades. In addition to that it observed the rise of Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican religious zealot who acceded to the throne shortly thereafter. Much being known for his criticism of the leadership of the Church, Savonarola's reign was anathematized in 1497 by Pope Alexander VI.

No sooner after the return of Machiavelli to Florence, Italy was invaded by Charles VIII of France –this being one of the first of several French invasions that would occur during Machiavelli's lifetime. Machiavelli entered the Florentine government as soon as he turned twenty-one and got the opportunity to meet the greatest envoys of his time – Pope Alexander and Kind Louis XII. Though both Pope Alexander and King Louis XII influenced Machiavelli's thoughts, it was the intrigue of Cesare Borgia which magnetized him the most. Borgia was known for his viciousness and was despised by many people. He was a crafty and a spiteful politician, nevertheless, Machiavelli believed in his traits of leadership and in the fact that Borgia was capable enough to unify Italy.

The Prince: A Compendium

Opening with a letter of favour to Lorenzo De Medici, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is an analysis of how to acquire political power and methods to maintain it. The intention behind this dedication is his hope of pleasing the Medici family, gaining their trust and augmenting his political standards. The first section discusses different types of principalities or states – the Hereditary Principalities, Republics, New Princedoms and Mixed Principalities. His primary focus lies on the new states for those are the most complicated to deal with.

The next section talks about the ruler and his military affairs. Machiavelli says that a prince should always pay close attention to all the minute details of his military associations for a prince is not judged by his strength but by the merits of his own arms. He has described four types of armies in his treatise –Mercenaries or soldiers who are hired; Auxiliaries or the troops that are loaned by other rulers; the most desirable kind –Native Troops which are composed of citizens from one's own kingdom and Mixed Troops – a combination of native troops and mercenaries or auxiliaries.

Another important element to be considered is reputation, which forms the basis of the next section. This sections conferences the character a prince must possess and the code of conduct he must follow. Qualities like that of displaying excessive mercy, being generous when the fiscal position is not in harmony can prove fatal. Princes should have the capability to choose wise advisors and avoid flatterers and sycophants. Not only they should master the art of stinginess but also must avoid making themselves hated and despised.

The last section outlines Italy's political situation. The rulers of Italy had lost their states and the only way for them to regain their lost control was to adhere to the principles laid down by Machiavelli. This section ends with Machiavelli's pleadings to the Medici family to follow his doctrine –a call to unify Italy and to free the country from foreign domination.

Machiavelli: Justifying his Ways to Men

Machiavelli served his country as a counsellor and diplomat for a time period of thirteen years and such political developments left a grave impact on his life and his career. In 1512, when the Medici family gained control of Florence, Machiavelli found himself dismissed from his office and wrongly accused of participating in a conspiracy to restore the republic. He narrowly escaped execution and was exiled instead. His exile from the court and the consequent disgrace he faced was one of the main reasons he wrote *The Prince*. The dedication of the book to the then-governor of Florence – Lorenzo De Medici makes his intentions clear of gaining his hand back at politics. Not only had he written *The Prince* to ingratiate himself with the new Florentine ruler but also because he was trying to save his unchaste honor.

Despite being a republic himself, why did Machiavelli dedicate his writing *The Prince* to a despotic leader like Lorenzo De Medici, the likes of which he has despised in his very first composition Discourses? Can we call him insincere or a hypocrite? The answer to which is No. Though his book Discourses talk about how republic is the ideal form of government and how a state shouldn't be governed by an authority of a prince, we must not fail to acknowledge the fact that in his treatise *The Prince*, Machiavelli has never augmented the idea of a prince ruling a country but laid down some rules as to how that prince should carry out his duties and responsibilities if he wishes to be celebrated and dignified. At the end of

the day, Machiavelli's book is totally realistic and not in any way optimistic. Leaving aside what government is "best" in a perfect planet, *The Prince* underestimates the vicinity of an authoritarian, and tries to envision how such a ruler may realize triumph.

Machiavelli offers Lorenzo a master handbook that very precisely and aptly deals with the situations of the then Florence. He appears to be really intrigued by utilizing his political experience, and in addition his wide perusing in history and theory, to help Lorenzo be the best ruler he might be. Naturally he expected some personal gain from the books as well - Machiavelli plainly trusted that Lorenzo might find *The Prince* so accommodating that he would promptly carry its writer to Florence where he could be a political advisor by and by! Though the issue is still highly debatable but it is generally believed by many scholars that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a sketch highlighting his merits and achievements, his knowledge and the fact that how useful he could be as an advisor to Lorenzo De Medici. Following the age old tradition where princes were given a handbook encircling the guidelines to be adopted to become the greatest of their time, Machiavelli's *The Prince* is a sort of 'anti-thesis' which doesn't teach the prince how to be good and moral but how to be effective.

Unfortunately though for Machiavelli, his plan did not work out. Lorenzo did not seem to appreciate the content of the treatise very much despite it containing lavish words of praise for the Medici family and the popes, and certainly he never called Machiavelli back from the exile.

Machiavelli and Plato

Machiavelli was a man whose work significantly moulded legislative issues and the specialty of governing till the present time. He had convictions about how an administration ought to be run and his perspectives on that are what have come to shape today's political environment. Comparing Machiavellianism to the theories of Plato and of Aristotle we see that Machiavelli might see numerous things that he loved in Plato. In *The Prince* he made it clear that a ruler must comprehend what to do and must have the ability to do what is wanted. Plato's guardians, likewise, are the most fit to control and the most fit to administer. They know how to make the intense choices and they are ready to make the fundamental pronouncements on the grounds that it is for the benefit of the polis. Besides, Machiavelli and Plato concur that goodness is required to make a great progress. Without righteousness, every single progress, if it be Rome or Athens, Carthage or Egypt, will fall assuming that its rulers are low and don't take after the laws of the area.

On the other hand, there are some key distinctions between Plato and Machiavelli. The most glaring is Machiavelli's attestation that the individuals might as well ordinarily be allowed to sit unbothered in order to expedite the ruler's continued support from the individuals. Plato obviously accepts that an administration needs to straightforwardly meddle with individuals in order to make their lives more idealistic. An alternate glaring point of contrast is that in *The Prince* Machiavelli's ruler is concerned with little more than his support of force. Plato's ruler is ethical and looks after his individuals, not his own energy. These distinctions are fairly glaring thus might appear to prescribe that their particular political hypotheses are contrary.

Machiavelli and Aristotle

Machiavelli and Aristotle consented to the issue of the distinctive lives of the individuals who are dominated. Machiavelli in *The Prince* made clear that a ruler who wishes to stay in force may as well allow his individuals to sit unbothered. Aristotle, straight in spite of Plato, concurs with that appraisal. That is on the grounds that it is vital to ensure the benefit of all and attempting to order what individuals can and can't do in their lives is basically set to avoid the common good being disturbed. At last, the most fundamental likeness is that both Aristotle and Machiavelli were practical individuals. They saw the planet as it was and the tended to it as they accepted it would have done well to be tended to.

Aristotle and Machiavelli do disagree on several points. It was primarily accepted by Aristotle that the middle class was the most capable and undaunted aggregation of individuals to direct a nation. While Machiavelli accepted that in any type of government the ruler ought to be a solitary ruler. All the examples quoted by Machiavelli were that of monarchical rulers. While on one hand Aristotle held the view that leaving the polis unbothered was to protect the common good, Machiavelli believed that letting his people sit unbothered was simply a means to protect the power of the ruler. The standard notion of administration being better when the ruler is feared by the entire polis is one principle which Aristotle did not agree to for he believed that this opinion might not only be unproductive but also hinder the inhabitants to communicate freely and state their requirements. Despite a few differences, Aristotle and Machiavelli do seem to be fundamentally the same.

Isaiah Berlin – The Originality of Machiavelli

Many critics have already spoken aloud about Machiavelli and his ideals in *The Prince*; Isaiah Berlin's essay is by far the most interesting one. In the essay, *The Originality of Machiavelli* by Isaiah Berlin, Berlin does not propagate what *The Prince* talks about but in a way defends Machiavelli's intentions of writing the treatise. Berlin extends his view points and corroborates that Machiavelli is not in favour of dictatorship but in the effectiveness of that dictator's rule, that is, if at all any state is governed by one. Berlin also talks about Machiavellian principles and announces them to be moral and ultimate instead of being instrumental. Backing up Machiavelli's idea of Christian morality he explains that if a private citizen objects to the political methods of Machiavelli, then he'd rather lead a 'morally good life,' (Berlin 57) seek a corner of his own and must not make himself responsible for the life of others or expect good fortune. He says that morality in a ruler can create vulnerability and Machiavelli's idea of placing personal success over personal morality helps in the making of a good prince. Finally, Berlin justifies Machiavelli by showing that *The Prince* is a discipline from which men can gain knowledge and it is not an erudite pastime to be coddled in. And that Machiavelli's attitude has always been social and not individual.

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