

# *The Prince* Book Review

## 1 Plot Summary

In *The Prince* Niccolò Machiavelli shrewdly outlines the strategies that a ruler must follow to maintain his position and govern his state. With a clear and direct authorial voice, Machiavelli employs ancient and contemporary examples to illustrate the pragmatic tactics of successful leaders. Dedicating his book to the Florentine ruler Lorenzo de' Medici, Machiavelli draws heavily on his own political experience to support his exceedingly realistic views on human nature and the techniques of able rulers. Contradicting conventional morality, Machiavelli advises wise princes to use violence and cunning to safeguard their states. *The Prince* explores the careful balance between contrasts, comparing virtue and vice, prowess and fortune, and subjects and rulers.

At the start of the treatise, Machiavelli asks Lorenzo to accept *The Prince* as a "token of my devotion," stating that his "long acquaintance" with political affairs and "continuous study of the ancient world" inform his writing. In the first chapters, Machiavelli outlines the scope of *The Prince*, declaring his focus on the various types of princes and principalities. Arguing that new principalities pose greater difficulties than hereditary states, Machiavelli segues into a discussion of composite principalities, in which new states form an "appendage to an old state." Within this context, Machiavelli raises the guiding principals of *The Prince*, encouraging rulers to cultivate the "goodwill" of the people and to study the art of warfare. Machiavelli urges princes to approach political disorders like "a wasting disease," taking care to diagnose and treat them quickly and resolutely.

Machiavelli declares that every stable state shares the same foundations, "good laws and good arms." However, Machiavelli places an emphasis on good arms, explaining that good laws "inevitably follow" from military might. Machiavelli warns rulers to avoid the use of mercenary and auxiliary troops, on which he blames "the present ruin of Italy" and the earlier downfall of the Roman Empire. According to Machiavelli, "The first way to lose your state is to neglect the art of war," and he encourages princes to study warfare in peacetime so that they may "reap the profit in times of adversity."

Addressing the distinction between prowess and fortune, Machiavelli contends that fortune controls half of human affairs, leaving the other half to free will. Machiavelli advises princes to "take precautions" against the "malice of fortune," using prowess to prepare for unpredictability. Turning to contemporary Italy, Machiavelli blames the weakness of its states on the political shortcomings of its rulers. Machiavelli concludes by imploring Lorenzo to use the lessons of *The Prince* to unify war-torn Italy and thus reclaim the grandeur of Ancient Rome.

## 2 Review

Ground-breaking and brilliantly insightful, especially for its time. So much of what Machiavelli says is now an ingrained part of political thinking that it comes across as obvious when you read it. However, it was Niccolò who first put forth these concepts that have become the dogma and foundation of modern political thought. He put the "real" in realpolitik. I don't think the contribution he made to political theory can be overstated. It was *The Prince* that called out the distinction between what men "say" and what they "do." He did not invent political immorality, but he did recognize it as an effective, and at times crucial, aspect of rule. Something the famous rulers of history have always known... and practiced.