



Niccolò Machiavelli

Niccolò Machiavelli famously claimed that successful political leaders need to possess the strength of a lion and the cunning of a fox. This was a lesson he first learnt when, as a Florentine diplomat, he was able to observe firsthand some of the most celebrated political figures of his age in action.

In *The Prince*, his now notorious essay on the art of leadership, he cites with approval the ruthless cunning that Cesare Borgia employed to dispose of his political rivals. It was Machiavelli's view that leaders had to learn how *not* to be good in order to rule effectively.

In this sense, Machiavelli was an amoralist. He thought that rulers should set aside moral considerations when making political decisions; their only concern should be with retaining their grip on power. This meant that it was inevitable that leaders would sometimes have to be cruel, have to rule by dread of punishment, and have to behave in ways that would be judged to be immoral by commonly accepted standards.

However, it would be a mistake to think that Machiavelli favoured nefarious behaviour for its own sake; his political thinking was a lot more sophisticated than that. The highest calling of a leader, or, to use Machiavelli's terminology, a prince, is to strive for honour and glory. It is a mark of the *virtù* of a prince that he is willing to do whatever is necessary in the face of unpredictable fortune to achieve this end. However, this does not justify cruelty for cruelty's sake. Thus, Machiavelli argued that:

Well used are those cruelties...that are carried out in a single stroke, done out of necessity to protect oneself,

and are not continued but are instead converted into the greatest possible benefits for the subjects. Badly used are those cruelties which, although being few at the outset, grow with the passing time instead of disappearing. Those who follow the first method can remedy their condition with God and with men...the others cannot possibly survive.

There is a related point here. Machiavelli believed that effective leadership, even though it required that rulers occasionally put aside moral considerations, would tend to have good outcomes for all. Thus, for example, he argued that the excessively merciful prince, by tolerating disorder, will often bring greater harm to a community than the cruel prince who creates harmony through fear. Likewise, generosity in a leader will almost always lead to discontent; in the end, the prince who is predisposed to outlandish displays of spending will have to tax the people in order to pay for such excesses, and will be resented and disliked as a result.

Machiavelli, then, is a much more sophisticated thinker than is often thought. His originality lies in his desire to confront the grubby realities of political life. By insisting that the mark of great leadership is the ability to master the demands of unpredictable fortune, he showed himself to be the first truly modern political theorist.

Amoralism: To behave amorally is to behave in such a way which takes no account of moral judgements. It is not to be immoral, since this would be to accept the relevance of moral claims, but rather to reject the appropriateness or possibility of moral judgement altogether.