

Frederick II, *Anti-Machiavel*, or An Examination of Machiavel's Prince (1741)

Abstract

Frederick II (1712–1786) came to the throne of Prussia in 1740. Determined to rule in the style of an “enlightened despot,” Frederick (who came to be called “the Great”) turned his analytical eye to European works of political theory. His 1740 book *Anti-Machiavel* is a chapter-by-chapter rebuttal of Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Although he is not listed as its author, his authorship was an open secret at the time. Voltaire, who is listed as publisher, edited and expanded on Frederick's text. In this chapter from the 1741 English translation, Frederick takes up the question of whether rulers should pursue a strategy of truthfulness with their subjects, or if they are permitted to mislead them.

Source

Chap. XVIII.

How far Princes Ought to Fulfil their Engagements.

Every one knows how commendable it is in a Prince to fulfil his Engagements, and to act a sincere, not a deceitful Part. It has nevertheless appeared by Experience, in our Times, that those Princes who made light of their Word, and artfully deceived Mankind, have done great things, and have at length got the better of such as proceeded upon honourable Principles. We must therefore know that there are two Ways of contending, one by Right and Equity, the other by Force. The former is that of Men, and the latter that of Beasts: But because the former frequently proves ineffectual, recourse must be had to the latter. It is therefore necessary that Princes should be well skilled both how to put on the Man and the Beast. This is what the Ancients have figuratively pointed out to them, where they relate that the Education of Achilles and of several other Princes was committed to Chiron the Centaur; to signify that as the Preceptor was half Man, half Beast, so the Disciples ought to participate of both Natures, the one being of a short Duration without the other. Since therefore a Prince is obliged to assume the Beast, he ought to put on the Fox and the Lion, because the Lion is but ill-provided against Snakes, and the Fox against Wolves; so that he must be a Fox to know the Snakes, and a Lion to terrify the Wolves. Those who assume the Lion only, do not rightly understand their Office. From hence it follows, that a wise Prince neither can nor should fulfil his Engagements, when the Observance of them would turn to his Prejudice, and when the Causes for which he entered into them no longer subsist.

If Men were all good, this Maxim would be false; but as they are bad, and would not observe their Promises to us, we ought as little to think ourselves bound by our Engagements to them; nor will a Prince ever want justifiable Pretences to colour such a Violation. I could cite a thousand Examples; and shew how many Treaties of Peace, and how many Promises, have been rendered void and of no Effect, through the Perfidy of Princes, among whom those who have best known how to act the Part of the Fox have been generally the most successful. This Nature of the Fox must nevertheless be artfully disguised, and the Person who adopts it must be a thorough Master in Hypocrisy and Dissimulation. So simple are Men, and so tame to their present Necessities, that he who deceives will always find People who will suffer themselves to be deceived. I shall quote one Example, which is still fresh in our Memory. The sole Business and Aim of Pope Alexander VI. was to cozen Mankind; yet he always found Matter to work upon; and as no Man dealt in stronger Asseverations, or in more solemn Oaths than he, so no Man minded his Engagements less^[1], notwithstanding which, he succeeded in every Attempt to deceive, because he thoroughly knew how to attack People on their weak side.

It is not therefore necessary that a Prince should have all the above-mentioned Qualities; but it is extremely requisite that he should appear to have them^[2]: I will even venture to affirm, that his having them, and putting them in Practice, would be to his Prejudice; whereas his putting on the Appearance of them must be for his Interest. Let him seem, and let him actually be, merciful, true to his word, humane, religious and sincere; but at the same time let him have so much Command of himself, that if Occasion requires, he may be quite the reverse.^[3]

I must observe, that a Prince, and especially a new Prince, cannot practice all those things by which Men acquire the Reputation of Goodness; because for the Safety of his Government he will frequently be obliged to act contrary to the Dictates of Humanity, Charity and Religion. He must therefore have a flexible disposition, so as to turn with the Winds and Variations of Fortune; and as I observed above, he should be virtuous when he can, but not scruple to be vicious when he must. In short, a Prince ought to be strictly upon his Guard, not to let a Word drop from him which does not favour of the five Qualities above mentioned; and to judge of him by his Looks and Discourse, he should seem to be all Goodness, Sincerity, Humanity and Religion. There is nothing of which it is more necessary to have the Appearance than of this last Quality; because men in general judge by Sight, and not by Feeling; every one having the Faculty of seeing, few that of Perception. All see what you appear to be, few know what you really are, and these few dare not contradict the Opinion of the Multitude, which is backed by the Majesty of Government. In the Actions of all Men, and particularly in those of Princes, (against whom there lies no Appeal) People fix their Eyes on the Event. For this Reason let a Prince only take care to maintain his Power, and every one will praise the Means as honourable^[4], because the Vulgar always judge by Appearances and the Event of Things. Almost the whole World comes under this Denomination, and the Opinion of the Few only takes Place where the Multitude have nothing to judge by. A certain Prince now living, whom it is not proper to name, talks of nothing but Peace and Fidelity; but had he practiced either, he must frequently have lost both his Denominations and Reputations.^[5]

Machiavel, the Preceptor of Tyrants, has the Boldness to affirm, that Princes may impose upon the World by Dissimulation. This is the first Position which I shall endeavour to refute. The extreme Curiosity of the Publick is well known; it is a Being that sees every thing, hears every thing, and divulges whatever it has heard or seen. If its Curiosity examines the Conduct of particular Men, 'tis only to fill up idle Hours; but if it considers the Characters of Princes, 'tis with an Eye to its own Interest. And indeed Princes are more exposed than all other Men, to the Conjectures, Comments and Judgment of the World; they are a sort of Stars, at which a whole People of Astronomers are continually levelling their Telescopes and Cross-staves; Courtiers who are near them are daily taking their Observations; a single Gesture, a single Glance of the Eye, discovers them; and the People who observe them at a greater Distance, magnify them by Conjectures; in short, as well may the Sun hide its Spots, as great princes their Vices and their genuine Character, from the Eyes of so many curious Observers.

If the Mask of Dissimulation should cover, for a time, the natural Deformity of a Prince, yet he could never keep his Mask always on; he would sometimes be obliged, was it only for a Breathing, to throw it off; and one view of his naked Features would be sufficient to content the Curious. It will therefore be in vain for Dissimulation to dwell in the Mouths of Princes; Craftiness in their Discourses and Actions will have no Effect: To judge of Men by their Words and Professions, would be the way to be always mistaken; we therefore compare their Actions with one another, and then with their Words; and against this repeated Examination, Falsity and Deceit will find no Refuge; No Man can well act any Part but his own; he must really have the same Character which he would bear in the World; Without this, the Man who thinks to impose upon the Publick, imposes upon none but himself.

Sixtus Quintus, Philip II. passed for Hypocrites, and enterprising Men, but not for being virtuous. Let a Prince be as artful as he would, he will never be able, even by following all our Author's Maxims, to gain the Character of Virtue which he has not, and avoid the Scandal of Crimes which belong to him.

Machiavel argues no better, in the Reasons he assigns for employing Trick and Hypocrisy. The ingenious, but fallacious Application of the Fable of the Centaur proves nothing; for if that Animal was half Man, half Horse, does it follow from thence, that Princes ought to be crafty and false? A Man must have a strong Inclination to inculcate Crime, who employs Arguments so weak and so far-fetched as this of the Centaur.

But here follows a Reasoning as false as any we have yet met with. Our Politician affirms, that a Prince ought to have the Qualities both of the Lion and the fox; of the Lion, to destroy the Wolves; and of the Fox, to avoid Snakes: From whence he infers, that a wise Prince neither can nor should fulfil his Engagements: Here is a conclusion without Premises. Would not any other Man blush to throw out such impious Sophistry?

If Machiavel's confused Notions could be strained into good Sense, and found Morality, they might be represented thus: The World resembles a Match at Gaming, where Sharpers and fair Players are promiscuously engaged: A Prince therefore who is in the Game, and would not be cheated himself, should be well acquainted with all the Ways of cheating others, not in order to put any of these Lessons in Practice, but only that he may hinder them from being practiced upon him by Gamesters. But to return to Machiavel's Sophistry. Because all Men, says he, are wicked, and at all times break their Faith and Promise to you, there is no Obligation upon you to keep yours with them. Now here is a manifest Contradiction, for he says a few Lines after, that Dissemblers will always find People simple enough to be imposed upon. How can this be reconciled with the other? All Men are wicked, and yet you find Men simple enough to be imposed upon! But it is not true, that all Men are wicked: One must have a strange misanthropic turn, not to perceive, that in every Society there are a great many honest Men, and that the major Part are neither good nor bad. But without supposing all the World to be wicked, how could Machiavel have supported his detestable Maxims? Nay, granting that Men are as wicked as he represents them, would it follow that we ought to imitate their Example? If any Man robs, or commits Murder, I conclude that he deserves to be hanged, not that I must act accordingly. If Honour and Virtue were to be banished the World, said Charles the Wise, they ought to find an Asylum with Princes.

After endeavoring to prove the Necessity of Vice, our Author would encourage his Scholars by shewing them the Facility of succeeding in it. Those who are skilled in the Art of Dissimulation, he affirms, will never be at a Loss to find Men simple enough to be duped by them. His Meaning is, Your Neighbour is a Blockhead, and you are a Man of Sense; wherefore you must cheat him. These are Syllogisms for which some of Machiavel's Scholars have been hanged and broke upon the Wheel.

Not content with attempting to shew the Necessity and Facility of being vicious, our Author endeavours to point out the Felicities that attend Vice. But it unfortunately happens, that his Hero, Caesar Borgia, the greatest and most persidious of all Villains, was in Effect extremely miserable. Machiavel takes great Care not to touch upon this Part of his Life, and is forced to have recourse to the History of wicked Popes and Emperors, He maintains, that Pope Alexander VI. the most false and impious Man of his time, was always successful in Deceit, because he perfectly knew the Weakness of Mankind, with regard to Credulity. Now I will venture to affirm, that the Success of Pope Alexander was owing not so much to the Credulity of Man, as to certain Events and Circumstances of that Time, and especially to the Rivalship between France and Spain, to the Divisions and Animositities that prevailed among the chief Families of Italy, and to the Passions and Weakness of Lewis XII.

Don Lewis de Haro, an able Politician, looked upon Deceit as an Error in Politicks: He used to say of Cardinal Mazarin, that his Eminence had one great Fault in his political Character, which was, that he always cheated. The Fame Mazarin wanting to employ the Marshal de Faber in making a filippery Treaty; Permit me, my Lord, says Faber, to refuse cheating the Duke of Savoy, especially in a trifling Affair: The World knows that I am an honest Man; be pleased therefore to reserve my Integrity for some other Occasion, when it may do Good to my country.

To say nothing either of Honour or Virtue, but only to consider the Interest of Princes; I say it is bad Policy in them to impose upon and dupe the World, for they are never sure of succeeding but once, and by on Act of Deceit they lose the Confidence of all their Neighbours.

A certain Power very lately published a Manifesto, setting forth the Reasons of her Conduct, and presently after acted in a manner quite opposite to all her Pretences. It must be owned that such glaring Deceitfulness must needs make one forfeit the Confidence of others, for the sooner the Contradiction follows the Protestation, 'tis the more palpable. The Church of Rome, to avoid the like Inconsistency, has very wisely prescribed a Noviciat of a hundred Years to those whom it places in the Number of its Saints, in which time the Memory of their Faults and Extravagancies is entirely lost, those who knew them personally when living, and could swear against them, are dead and gone, and nothing obstructs the Notion of Saintship, which the Church would impose upon the Publick.

The Reader, I hope, will pardon this little Digression. To return to Machiavel, I own there are some unhappy Cases, when a Prince cannot help breaking his Treaties and Alliances: But he ought to do it with as much Honour as he can, by giving timely Notice of it to his Allies, and shewing that he is forced to it by the greatest Necessity, and for the Preservation of his People, which are the only Cases wherein it is allowable.

I shall conclude this Chapter with making one more Remark. Observe how fertilely one Vice propagates another in the Hands of Machiavel. 'Tis not enough for his Prince to be cruel, deceitful, perfidious, and irreligious, he must crown all his Vices with that of Hypocrisy. Machiavel thinks the People will be more gained by his Devotion, than offended with his Oppressions. There are others of the same Opinion. For my own part, the World, methinks, is very indulgent as to Errors in Speculations, when they are such as do not necessarily corrupt and vitiate the Heart: A People will always be better affected to an unbelieving Prince, if he is an hones Man, and a good Master, than to one who is orthodox, but a Villain or a Tyrant. 'This not upon a Prince's Opinions, but upon his Actions only, that the Happiness of his People depends.

NOTES

[1] It was said of Pope Alexander VI. and of Duke Valentine his son, that the Father never did what he said, and the Son never said what he did; and that both went by this fundamental rule, to give their Faith to every Man, and to keep it with none. When they were reproached with their Insincerity, they would answer, that they had given their Oath indeed, but not their Promise.

[2] A Maxim which amounts to this: You must be seemingly an honest Man, and at bottom a Villain. Charles V. always swore by the Faith of an honest Man, and always acted the Reverse of what he swore. The Truth is, he had read and studied Machiavel's Prince, which, according to a modern Historian, was one of the three Books he liked, and caused to be translated for his own Use.

[3] "Though his Style seems too licentious, and not decent and virtuous enough to authorize in some Passages what has the Appearance of Vice, yet as he had a mind to fall in with the Nature of his Subject, he could not write otherwise, without losing what he aimed at. For it is very hard for a Prince to preserve his Dominions, when surrounded by powerful and ambitious Neighbours, and supported by wicked and unfaithful Subjects, unless sometimes he departs from the Severity of the Rules of Conscience. And it is a certain Rule in this World, which is naturally vicious that no long Success can be met with, even in sovereign dignities, unless a Man knows how to help himself in time of Necessity, by having recourse to Vice; that when the Necessity ceases, he may immediately return to Virtue." These are the Words of Gaspar d'Auvergue, who has been quoted before in the Notes of Cap. XV.

[4] Nihil gloriosum nisi tutum; & omnia retinendae dominationis honesta. Salust. "Nothing is glorious but what is safe, and there are no Means of maintaining Dominion, but are honourable". Tacitus relates, that Agrippina, Nero's Mother, thought no Price too great for a Crown. Decus, pudorem, corpus, cuncta regno viliora habere.

[5] Meaning Ferdinand King of Castile and Arragon, who by his Insincerity and Perfidy conquered Italy and Navarre. An Italian Prince, his Contemporary, used to say, that he would never trust to Ferdinand's Oath, till he swore by some God in whom he believed.

Source of English translation: *Anti-Machiavel, or an Examination of Machiavel's Prince*. With Notes Historical and Political. Published by Mr. de Voltaire. Translated from the French. London: T. Woodward. 1741. Available online:

<https://books.google.com/books?id=9ydCswEACAAJ&pg=PR1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Source of the French original text: Frederick II, *Anti-Machiavel ou Essai de critique sur le Prince de Machiavel* / publié par Mr. de Voltaire. A La Haye: chez Pierre Paupie, 1740, pp. 113–20. Available online: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1512590d>

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