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The Trouble with Princes

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Amanda Eshelman is a student at the University of Missouri, Columbia, majoring in biology. She is from St. Louis, Missouri. She is interested in veterinary medicine. She decided to write about *The Prince* in her Middle Ages and Renaissance class primarily because she hated it a lot. This is her attempt at a reasonable justification for bashing a centuries old classic and an exploration of power and self.

I grew up in household where the kids learned to sleep through the rock-and-roll music emanating from the basement. The music was courtesy of my father, civil engineer and rock guitarist in equal measures. He grew up listening to rock when it was still young, just a decade past the sixties. He is a product of those turbulent years that deeply and irrevocably changed our world. And likewise I am a product of my upbringing—my taste in music no exception. But is that all? Am I—and will I always be—only the product of the world I live in? Are we stuck in a cycle of self-interest and cynicism, doomed to repeat our own history?

After all, the hippies rebelled against their parents by being exactly the same as one another. Can we change? According to Machiavelli, we cannot and we do not. Everything that can be done has been done, and the best we can ever do is to imitate the past. I had great difficulty reading Machiavelli's *The Prince* because I wanted to reject out of hand his neat summation of humanity. But instantly denying the validity of a work that has survived centuries to land under the right hand of some of the most powerful men in the world would be arrogant to say the least. So what exactly is so scary about Machiavelli's ideas? Perhaps more importantly, do I have the right to disagree?

Machiavelli is ruled by the past. In *The Prince*, he backs up every argument he makes with an example from history. He presents no revolutionary ideas, simply picks apart the past and chooses the best course of action for his beloved Italy. Using the likes of Theseus, Alexander the Great, and Moses, he sets out to prove that the best—and the only—model is the past (Machiavelli, 2005, pp. 51, 54).

What is the problem with this line of reasoning? If fear worked to rule the people in the past, fear is the best option for the future. A prince, according to Machiavelli (2005), "must not care about the infamy of cruelty in keeping his subjects united and faithful" (p. 91). If war and bloodshed produced results, do it again. The cost does not matter. The problem is that by relying only on the past to guide the future,

we eliminate invention. We put an end to progress unless progress can be measured in the power of one man to humble peasants and conquer nations. Happiness, peace, and goodwill have no place in Machiavelli's cutthroat world. He grew up in a tumultuous time when men in good standing one day might be strung up in a very public and very gruesome way the next. This begins to explain his cynical view of humanity; what other conclusion could he draw but that the only way to gain and maintain power was to do what the brutal men around him were already doing? What could he do but become a brutal man amidst so much brutality? What can any of us do?

Machiavelli denies us the choice. Be what works or be nothing at all. And kindness, virtue, and altruism certainly don't work. Machiavelli lived with all of written history behind him, but he seems unable to imagine a future that deviates in the slightest from the bloody methods of the past. Five hundred years later, however, the present is very much unlike the past. Machiavelli would be horrified with the Salt March, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, or the Arab Spring: the power placed in the hands of the masses.

World leaders are checked by the United Nations, the president of one of the world's superpowers is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for nuclear disarmament, and nonviolent protest and social media help dethrone the president of Egypt of twenty-nine years. Social media alone would probably send Machiavelli spinning in his grave. Globalization has connected our planet, and the role of dictators in her future is shrinking. Machiavelli was too shortsighted. Pooling power in the hands of a few morally unrestricted men is not the only way. Today, the people simply will not allow it. There is still corruption, still war and oppression and tyranny, but I believe we are moving slowly—sometimes faltering but always moving—towards a future far better than anything Machiavelli could have imagined.

Machiavelli placed no importance on goodness except when the thin façade of morality would serve to further an agenda. He says that someone “who would wish to make a career of being good in every detail must come to ruin among so many who are not good” (p. 87). People are base and corrupt. They are “ungrateful, changeable, pretenders and dissemblers, avoiders of dangers, and desirous of gain” (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 91) More importantly, they are amenable to domination.

Is morality so subjective? Is humanity so ignoble? Taking power is certainly easier if you believe that people are inherently evil. It is far more difficult to imagine a world in which people are inherently good. For men seeking to rule over the weak, such a world is a dangerous place. Was it therefore necessary to support his arguments that Machiavelli insist people were immoral? As long as people are not born with unalienable dignity, dictators can do whatever they like and sleep easy at night. Or perhaps like his judgment on effective ruling, were his conceptions tinted a darker shade of gray by the era in which he lived?

Machiavelli was addressing Lorenzo de' Medici with his treatises, and in writing from this commanding position, of course he could not believe anyone could be inherently good (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 39). Old Nick could only see the worst because that is all there was to see. On a large scale, true altruism is hard. His government was corrupt. His country was corrupt. And in times of such corruption, goodness can sometime only be seen on an individual level.

I believe that people are inherently good. From atop the throne of bureaucracy, that goodness may be obscured behind the clouded lens of power, but it is there. One can always argue that no good deed is entirely selfless, but I am compelled to disagree. Good exists. Good people exist. It is more obvious now than in any period of history preceding. Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr.: these are our idols, marked by selflessness, peace, and goodwill. There are many more names—some famous and some not—that can be added to the list. What is more, Machiavelli ignores the common man. He focuses on a select few “rare and marvelous” men and completely disregards the power of the people (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 120). People are irrational and it is wonderful. At our own expense, we do good works because they help others—not because they benefit ourselves. Of course, much of the evil Machiavelli saw in those around him still remains, but just as we move towards peace, we work for goodness.

What Machiavelli’s arguments amount to is this: there is no hope for a better future. The best we can do is to imitate the past. I am undeniably an optimistic college kid. I work more for spending money than to support myself. I don’t have to support a family or struggle to find a job or housing or food. But it is my choice to believe there is hope for our future. I have been selective in my own historical examples, but can they not be our ideal models instead of the dictators and warlords of Machiavelli? The alternative is to swear by Machiavelli and pervert the world for power and glory.

I don’t know if Machiavelli was right, but I do know that I don’t have to follow him. I am a product of my upbringing, but I am also a product of every person I ever met, every book I have ever read, every idea I’ve ever invented or listened to or shared. Humans are creative and hopeful and marvelous. We don’t need to be defined and imprisoned by our past. And what does any of this have to do with rock-and-roll? In the words of Cat Stevens “now I’ve been happy lately, thinking about the good things to come/ and I believe it could be, something good has begun.” I haven’t found the same sentiment and feeling better expressed anywhere else. Maybe I’m naïve, but I’ll take “Peace Train” over *The Prince*, the defiant and hopeful music of my dad over the resignation of Machiavelli. Corporate CEOs and weighty politicians may hold *The Prince* as their bible, but I trust humanity instead. I don’t care if I have a right to disagree. I disagree anyway.

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