

# The Secret Purpose of Machiavelli's 'The Prince'

The most common view today of 15th-century Florentine philosopher-statesman Niccolò Machiavelli is that he was evil. Dubbed the founder of modern political philosophy, his evil reputation comes from his most famous work, [\*The Prince\*](#), which openly endorses treachery, deceit, and backstabbing as political tactics. So, it's no wonder that most people's idea of Machiavelli is that he spent his entire career coming up with ways for tyrants to gain and maintain control over others.

But rather ironically, what Machiavelli wrote most about was not manipulation and lying but the importance of liberty. His main body of work, [\*The Discourses on Livy\*](#) (also known as *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius* or *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy*), is about how it was the great amount of liberty enjoyed by the Romans that enabled them to rise to the heights of their grandeur and how he wanted the Florentines to emulate their Roman ancestors.

Many commentators have noted that the temperament of *The Discourses* and that of *The Prince* are often at odds with one another. The former focuses on Rome and its prosperity, rooted in liberty; the latter appears to be a how-to on treachery, fear mongering, and power grabbing. The former is a dialogue that extracts its content mostly from the historical era of the Roman Republic; the latter pulls more from the Roman Empire—that is, the decline and fall of Rome. *The Prince* places hereditary princedom upon a high altar and exalts tyranny, whereas in *The Discourses*, Machiavelli disparages both (emphasis added):

*But, presently, when sovereignty grew to be hereditary and no longer elective, hereditary sovereigns began to degenerate*

*from their ancestors, and, quitting worthy courses, took up the notion that princes had nothing to do but to surpass the rest of the world in sumptuous display and wantonness, and whatever else ministers to pleasure so that **the prince coming to be hated, and therefore to feel fear, and passing from fear to infliction of injuries, a tyranny soon sprang up. Forthwith there began movements to overthrow the prince, and plots and conspiracies against him** undertaken not by those who were weak, or afraid for themselves, but by such as being conspicuous for their birth, courage, wealth, and station, could not tolerate the shameful life of the tyrant. The multitude, following the lead of these powerful men, took up arms against the prince and, he being got rid of, obeyed these others as their liberators.*

How is it that in *The Prince* Machiavelli appears to be promoting tyranny and the accumulation of absolute power, but in his more extensive *Discourses*, he reveals his distaste for tyranny and gives many examples as to why it ultimately falls?

Prior to writing *The Prince*, [Machiavelli](#) was a statesman of the Florentine Republic—a republic that the Medici family overthrew. To make an example of Machiavelli, the Medici imprisoned, tortured, and exiled him after they took power.

So, this is the question I ask you, dear reader: Imagine you have a Machiavellian personality, you are a man of status celebrated by your community, but you employ lies and flattery to get what you want in life. You're exceedingly ambitious. You also think you are smarter than everyone else.

What would you want to do to the person who overthrew the government you swore allegiance to, who expelled you from your influential position, arrested you as a conspirator and tortured you, and then, to add insult to injury, exiled you and your family to live in shame and poverty?

Would you accept defeat? Would you resign yourself to live out

the rest of your life in shame?

Or, as you languished in the pits of a murky dungeon, would you not plot revenge?

But what kind of revenge could you get if you didn't have an army or enough political power? What then might be your revenge?

If I were in such a position and had Machiavelli's temperament, I would gain my revenge in a more subtle way.

A little-known fact about *The Prince* is that it was not published in its author's lifetime. It was [dedicated](#) to [Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici](#), and it wasn't until five years after Machiavelli's death that it was officially published.

For all its seemingly glaring moral faults, there is a common reaction many people have after reading this famed "tyrant's handbook," and that is the unshakable impression that the author is being *sarcastic*. Not just the lay reader, but even many scholars [claim](#) the book is a work of satire.

I, however, don't believe *The Prince* is satire but an exercise in Machiavellianism as generally understood. The impression I get from reading and re-reading it is that this is a man who is lying, and I think that even when he was writing the book, he was withholding information for his own advantage.

I have come to view *The Prince* not so much as a treatise on how a prince should govern but more as a sort of Trojan horse. This is how we reconcile the fact that Machiavelli preaches one doctrine in one volume and the opposite doctrine in another.

To wit, he despises tyrannical rulers. He has a cyclical view of history, and with *The Prince*, he is encouraging the Medici family to engage in all types of behaviors that are sure to accelerate their demise (what could be more Machiavellian than

that?).

Machiavelli is a fox. He is a man laying a trap. He is the one conniving in the shadows and posing as a benevolent advisor but feeding his ruler a poisoned apple.

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