

## NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI AND THE MORALITY OF “THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS” IN *THE PRINCE*: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

**DR. BASIL S. NNAMDI**

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities  
University of Port Harcourt  
Rivers State, Nigeria  
docgurubeennamdi@gmail.com

&

**DR. TAMUNOSIKI V. OGAN**

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities  
University of Port Harcourt  
Rivers State, Nigeria  
tamunosikivictor@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

*Machiavelli has been, in many academic quarters, fiercely criticized, even vilified as the son of devil (MacDevil) for his frankness and political realism in his “The Prince”. A popular strand of his criticism considers his “The Prince” in its break with traditional morality in the political arena as amounting to some form of nihilism, a complete lack of morality or moral precepts and a dangerous political blue-print for brute use of political power. This paper seeks to prove wrong the foregoing position on Machiavelli by insisting that his “The end justifies the means” doctrine has a moral value of ‘good end’ of human action. If as in Aristotle, every action should be directed towards a good end, Machiavelli has not said anything different from what actually obtains in real life of human behaviourism. It is the position of this paper that Machiavellian conception of political power is not bereft or devoid of morality but rather belongs to a non-absolute, practical and realist, though of consequentialist moral category.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Niccolo Machiavelli made headlines in the political scene during the modern period of philosophy with the publication of his book *The Prince*, which attracted a lot of commentaries especially, with his famous maxim “*the end justifies the means*”. On the one hand are scholars who extolled Machiavelli for his insights in bringing to the fore the practical rudiments for excelling in politics. For these scholars, Machiavelli laid bare a practical and realistic treatise for understanding the rules of politics and how these rules are to be followed in order for an individual to succeed in politics. This implies that Machiavelli used his *magnum opus*, *The Prince*, to highlight the endearing qualities that a ruler and leader must exhibit to strengthen his hold on power and make his reign successful and preserve his state. Ratner (2017) buttresses this fact in relation to the relevance of Machiavelli to modern day politics by asserting that “Machiavelli is considered one of the seminal figures in modern day political thought with *The Prince*, which depicts a kind of behaviour that is regarded as

a manual for powerful leaders”. He sums up by maintaining that the significance of Machiavelli’s political philosophy lies in its realism, which when applied can serve a useful and practical purpose for rulers and leaders interested in politics as well as business tycoons. On the other hand, there are scholars who castigated and pilloried Machiavelli for expunging absolute traditional, often religious, morality out of politics and hence he was labeled a devil. In fact, the Catholic Church vehemently rejected everything about Machiavelli’s *The Prince* as it was seen to be antithetical to the teachings outlined by God and Christ in the Bible for mankind to emulate and completely adhere to. Ryan (2012) made this point clear when he asserts that Machiavellianism is used to quantify “deceptive politicians, businessmen, serial killers and personality traits”. Ratner again reiterates this fact by positing that “Machiavelli’s book is so influential that the word Machiavellian has come to be seen as an adjective that is synonymous with immoral, amoral and brutal politicians”. Bartleby (2001) corroborates it thus; “Machiavelli’s *The Prince* has been interpreted in various ways. His motive is probably mainly patriotic, but the exclusion of moral considerations in his treatment of politics led, even in his own century, to his name becoming a synonym for everything that is diabolical in public and private policy”.

However, it must be stated that despite the pungent negative criticisms and innuendos that have continually trailed Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, the thoughts expressed therein have consistently remained fascinating, thought-provoking and awe-inspiring because of its detailed analysis of the several qualities and dispositions that a ruler or leader must imbibe to set up a state, preserve and protect it and as well as make it formidable and highly respected. This is why many successful politicians and those in business have continued to applaud *The Prince* as a book replete with the keys and principles for success in public life. His analysis on the proper use of power remains a touchstone in contemporary political history as it reveals how a leader can consolidate on its acquired power to gain more territories, control his subjects and prevent disorder and instability. More importantly, his formulation of “the end justifies the means” speaks volume of his avowed commitment to promote the public good in terms of using any means available to ensure stability and overall well-being of all. Buttressing this fact succinctly, Gramsci (1971) maintains that “the basic thing about the Prince is that it is not a systematic treatment, but a live work in which political ideology and political science are fused in a dramatic form...” It is under the foregoing light that this paper seeks to find the positive import of *The Prince* on practical life in public realm of real politics.

## **HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS TO THE FORMULATION OF MACHIAVELLI’S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**

Machiavelli lived in an era where political power was concentrated in the hands of the Medici in Florence. After several years, he witnessed the usurpation of power from the Medici’s by Savonarola and the subsequent conquest of Florence by the Spanish Army and the consequent return of power to the Medici. In Machiavelli’s day, the rich were constantly in conflict with the poor as corruption became rampant in the church and among politicians, with the result that only the interests of the rich and powerful were promoted. However, the poor and others who were bitter with the current regime for encouraging loose and ostentatious living, had hope that a change of regime will come soonest and that the Medici will be overthrown for popular government to be enthroned. Thus, it did not come as a surprise when Savonarola, a man loved by all, especially the poor, took the reins of power, when Piero Medici fled Florence after the invasion of Italy by the French Army. Savonarola brought joy to the poor with his restoration of popular government. Plamenatz paints a lucid picture of the then reality as follows:

Machiavelli was born in May 1469...Cosimode' Medici had made himself virtually master of Florence by 1429 and the era of personal rule lasted till 1494, when Piero de' Medici, Cosimo's great-grandson, fled from Florence when the French invaded Italy. Machiavelli spent his first twenty-five years under a tyranny....Yet conflicts between rich and poor were as sharp and bitter in Florence as anywhere in Italy. Machiavelli grew up in a state where freedom never lost its attraction and seemed always within reach. When Piero fled, popular government was restored by the Dominican friar Savonarola...he was a democrat and moralist who attacked corruption, luxury and loose living, especially in high places, in both church and state.

From the foregoing, it is very clear that Machiavelli grew up where the brute use of power was exercised to promote the interest of the ruling class and its allies, and also to ensure the subjection and oppression of the poor. As a diplomat, Machiavelli traveled a lot and witnessed how several states were conquered in spite of the presence of strong armies. One particular scene that is worth describing is one in which " he was with Julius II when the Pope entered Perugia unarmed to take it from Giovanpaolo Baglioni who, though armed, dared not resist him"(Plamenatz, 8). It is, perhaps, pertinent to note here too that the rich corrupt politicians in both the state and church connived to bring down the reign of Savonarola to an abrupt end.

In 1512, the Spanish troops invaded Italy, conquered it and restored power back to the Medici, and Machiavelli was left out as no political position was given to him by the Medici. Instead, he was arrested, tortured and imprisoned for being an ardent supporter of the popular government which he served as Head of the Council and Secretary to the Council of Ten. Therefore, the positions occupied by Machiavelli afforded him the opportunity to understand the intrigues of power politics, especially with how it strengthen one's hold on the state, as well as to subdue one's enemies and engender loyalty from one's subjects and armies. Thus, his most influential book, *The Prince*, begins with an x-ray of the different types of Princedoms, be it hereditary or mixed. He also analyzed the dispositions that a ruler (Prince) must put up if he must succeed and the right type of persons that must be found around him, as well as the qualities he must exhibit. Such qualities he considered necessary for the state formidable, and they are such that the Prince should be feared and admired by his enemies, neighbours and followers alike. In Plamenatz's own diction, Machiavelli is interested in "what qualities, (what capacities and dispositions)rulers or leaders or ordinary citizens must have if a state is to endure, be respected by its neighbours and be formidable to them; and also what qualities a ruler or leader must have if he is to restore a corrupt state or establish a new one."

## **MACHIAVELLI ON VIRTUE, FORTUNE AND CHARACTER OF THE RULER OR LEADER**

Having observed how states were conquered and given up in his day, Machiavelli outlines several steps that should be put in place to forestall such occurrences and establish stability in the state. The first step for Machiavelli in this connection is virtue which, as he maintains, is an essential ingredient needed by a ruler to set up a republic or principality. It denotes the wit and ingenuity at the disposal of a ruler or leader for acquiring power and for promoting a stable, virile and well-ordered polity. Articulating the meaning of virtue as enunciated by Machiavelli, Color reiterates that virtue connotes "skill or temperament of the Prince, while Fortune denotes luck'. Corroborating the relevance of virtue in engendering a stable polity in Machiavelli's political thought, Plamenatz asserts that: "virtue and goodness are both indispensable, for men cannot live in society with one another unless they have something of both. What is more, they are connected; for there is little civic virtue among a

people deficient in goodness”. In Machiavelli’s view, virtue is different from the one attributed to religion, hence he identifies the ability to take risks, foresight, willingness to obey laws, firmness of purpose, as important virtue that one should cultivate in order to be a successful ruler or leader.

In addition, Machiavelli harps on the need for a ruler or leader to acquire the braveness and strength of a lion and the cleverness or cunning of the fox. For him, it is only in politics that you see different shades of individuals, so a ruler or leader needs to master the skills of politics to be able to overcome the power intrigues and deception inherent in politics. Therefore, Machiavelli maintains that a successful leader is one who is like a double-edge sword who must know how to switch his mood to match the situation at all times. To this end, the leader must be ruthless and cruel when the situation demands it, and must be honest, clement, generous and loyal when the situation calls for it. Machiavelli went further to assert that the ruler can only solidify his grip on power and gain the full support of his subjects when he learns to tell them what they want to hear when the occasion demands it. Commenting clearly on the relevance of the character trait that a ruler or leader should imbibe with his followers, Machiavelli posits: “for the mob is always impressed by appearances and by results, and the world is composed by mob”. Here, Machiavelli has clearly shown that cleverness and deceit are essential attributes for maintaining and strengthening one’s hold on power in politics and the world of business. He affirms that a ruler or leader who fails to abide by the deceptive principle in dealing with his subjects or followers is doomed to be ruined. Thus, in demonstrating why a ruler should not be good at all times, he maintains:

For the manner in which men live is so far removed from the way in which men ought to live, that he who leaves the common course for that which he ought to follow will find that it leads him to ruin rather than to safety. For a man who, in all respects, will carry out only his professions of good, will be apt to be ruined among so many that are evil. A prince therefore who desires to maintain himself must learn not always to be good...

With the above, Machiavelli demonstrates lucidly the type of personality traits that befit a ruler if he is to maintain himself in power.

### **THE MORALITY OF THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS**

The assertion by Machiavelli that the “end justifies the means” remains the highpoint of his political philosophy and this maxim is solely responsible for the controversies associated with *The Prince*. In fact, it is in this regard that many vilified and called Machiavelli a devil for removing traditional moral consideration in matters of politics. Mansfield (2017) reiterates this fact clearly when he posits that:

Many thinkers - and even President Eisenhower - have found it difficult to digest ‘Machiavelli's insistence on the tension between the demands of morality and the demands of political practise'. People did not (and do not) like the notion of the “ends” justifying the “means”, and people being used to achieve those “ends” either as individuals or for “reason of state”. This distaste towards Machiavelli... continued throughout political thought. He was accused of being evil, an atheist, and immoral.

However, it is this misconception as contained in the above quotation by scholars that there is no morality in Machiavelli’s “the end justifies the means” that necessitates this sub-section. The end justifies the means is a statement that carries with it the notion of sacrifice, which in itself has a moral

value directed at a good. In promoting the public good, which ought to be the primary goal of any political action, a lot of sacrifices ought to be made in order to achieve the public good. For instance, the economy of Ghana is effective today and socio-economic development attained because its former President, Jerry Rawlings, undertook a political that amounted to a house cleaning which in effect was aimed at a good end by executing those behind the economic woes of the country and today, the country is better off as the citizens are reaping the benefits of the huge sacrifice undertaken by Rawlings to attain their full potentials. This action, in traditional moral sense is immoral, but on the other hand desirable and what is more, its end result translated to a good that brought about a positive improvement in the life of the citizens. Hence, the end justifies it. Macaulay also points out the morality in Machiavelli's "the end justifies the means" by positing that; "Machiavelli is a man whose public conduct was upright and honourable, whose views of morality, where they differed from those of persons around him seemed to have differed for the better...he arranged them more luminously and expressed them forcibly than any writer". This view by Macaulay attests clearly that the end justifies the means as portrayed by Machiavelli carries with it a moral value that scholars who think otherwise fail to comprehend. This is why Souvik (2002) maintains that the end justifies the means as encapsulated in *The Prince* "carries in it an ethics of political convenience that did not preclude morality, virtue or Christian values entirely but only allows them when opportune". Souvik further reveals that the morality in Machiavelli's "the end justifies the means" can be grasped in his insistence that the Prince should ensure moderation (An offshoot of Aristotle's temperance) in the exercise of power. Machiavelli maintains that it is good to be good, but given the fact that we live a world where not everybody is good, one, for self-preservation does not need to be always but to be good when convenient, and otherwise when necessary for personal benefits. For Machiavelli to act against personal interest and desire is tantamount to self-destruction and self-mortification and the primordial instinct of self-preservation demands that every man acts according to personal interest. It is when personal interests clash in public realm of politics that the essence of politicking in terms of negotiation, persuasion, convection, compromises or consensus apply, besides clash of interests, in every action the actor seeks a beneficial end result. *The Prince* is truly the Bible of real politics for its realism.

Therefore, the principle of "the end justifies the means" carries with it a moral value that is aimed at a good end, most times of common good in nature. In fact, history has it that the dropping of atomic bomb in Hiroshima, though it recorded several casualties due to the negative effects of radiation, also helped in saving millions of lives of Americans and also put an end to the war. Here, the dropping of the atomic bomb is the means used in bringing about a good end – ending an expensive war in terms of costs in human lives and resources. Giving impetus to the morality in the end justifies the means, Subrata and Sushila (2007) assert: "Machiavelli did not condone the use of immoral or wicked ways. To him, the end was important, which could be attained by any means. He arrived at this understanding after observing the political game from close quarters in which ends justified the means. He contended that a ruler should not adhere to conventional morality, rather he should be willing to do so"

We can infer also that the moral value contained in the end justifies the means comes with a lot of human sacrifices as it is evident in families where individuals indulge in sacrifices just to ensure that others attain their heights in life. For instance, some individuals drop out of school to work in order to help train their siblings and ensure a better life. This action is also geared towards a good end. The work or job done (means) might be demeaning but this is overlooked for what actually matters in

such circumstance is the end result, which is, ensuring a better and good life for one's siblings, where they can achieve their full potentials.

It is actually the truth about human life in general and public life in particular to consider the end result in any human action and endeavour. It does not seem there is anything a human being does without weighing the benefits, and there may be few things humans can do without some negative import. Such negative imports range from stepping on somebody's toes, through hurting some individuals whose interests are undermined by the given action to short-changing or capitalizing on somebody's or some people's weaknesses. It is when the benefit of an action outweighs the disadvantages of the negative effects that an action is embarked upon. Every decision or action taken in the public realm of politics entails some sacrifices and the only justification of every human action or decision to an action is the desired end which must be considered to be good. It does not, therefore, seem that Machiavelli has said anything outside what actually obtains in real and practical life. It is therefore, the considered position of this paper that "the end justifies the means" is a moral principle based on objective realism amounting to a kind of pragmatist moral realism. Though, it may not pass as an absolute moral precept, yet not every moral precept is absolute. Hence the contention of the paper is that it is wrong to consider Machiavellian *The Prince* as being entirely bereft of morality or in other parlance, as amounting to moral or ethical nihilism. In this regard, the good end becomes the measure of any moral action due to Machiavellianism, and one may be tempted to ask if there is any action orientated towards a bad end that is desirable. If every action is orientated towards a good, what then is wrong in upholding Machiavellian "the end justifies the means" precept except where the means is out of tune with the end or where the means outweighs the end as to be unnecessary sacrifice? The benchmark or the standard of morality of "the end justifies the means" is the desired good end; hence any action embarked out of intended good result conforms to this Machiavellian principle of morality. I then wonder whether there is any voluntary human action that is not based on a desired result, after all, to be desired is to be good and hence Aristotle defines 'good' as what is desired. This in the final analysis amounts to a clarion call to be sure that every of our human action is orientated towards a good and desirable end. This is quite analogical to situational ethics that demands we do not act the same way in every situation, or rather on the other way round, that every our action should be determined by the situation in the given instance. There is no doubt that it amounts to moral or ethical relativism but that also represent a perspective of our moral life and existence and as such does not qualify it as nihilism.

Finally, it is very glaring that Machiavelli showed with his maxim that the public good remains the touchstone of any political action; hence the coinage of the end justifies the means. This implies that in the use of power, caution must be applied and this entails knowing when and how power is to be exercised in maintaining one's self, engendering loyal subjects as well as making the state formidable. His analysis of power, if carefully studied, reveals that it is not devoid of morality as his critics would have us believe. This fact is vividly illustrated by Skinner (1981) that; "once we restore Machiavelli to the world in which his ideas were initially formed, we can begin to appreciate the extraordinary originality of his attack on the prevailing moral assumptions of his age. And once we grasp the implications of his own moral outlook, we can readily see why his name is still so often invoked whenever the issues of political power and leadership are discussed".

## CONCLUSION

Machiavelli's analysis of power as demonstrated in his masterpiece *The Prince* is not devoid of morality and remains significant in the world of politics, business and other spheres today. Successful

politicians, businessmen and other stakeholders have applauded the book as a powerful handbook par excellence. Contrary to insinuations in many quarters that Machiavelli divorced morality from politics with his famous phrase “the end justifies the means”, this paper maintains that the maxim has a moral value of good end of human action. This implies that every human action is aimed at achieving or promoting a good end. It maintains that the morality inherent in the “end justifies the means” constitutes in pursuing a good end in every action since, in the political sphere, only the public good can validate every political act. Therefore, the paper concludes that the “end justifies the means” as enshrined in *The Prince* denotes a pragmatic and utilitarian morality of a consequentialist nature, which belongs to non-absolute, practical, realist and moral category. In sum, the paper agrees with Bartleby (2001) that “with all his faults and oversights, nothing can deprive Machiavelli of the glory of having been the modern Aristotle in politics, the first, or at least the first considerable writer who derived a practical philosophy from history, and exalted statecraft into science”.

## REFERENCES

- Bartleby.Com (2001). *Niccolo Machiavelli: The Prince*. Retrieved online from <http://www.bartleby.com/36/1/prince.pdf> on 15-06-18
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Macaulay, B.T. *Machiavelli*. Retrieved from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1850macaulay-machavelli.html> on 15-06-2018.
- Machiavelli, N. (1950). *The Prince and the Discourses*. M. Lerner (Ed.) with an Introduction. New York: Random Press.
- Mansfield, A. (2017). *What are the Criticisms of Machiavelli?* Retrieved online from <https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-criticisms-of-Machiavelli> on 15-06-18
- Plamenatz, J. (). *Machiavelli: The Prince, Selections from The Discourses and other Writings*.
- Ratner, P (2017). What Machiavelli Can Teach You about Leadership. Retrieved online from <http://bigthink.com/paul-ratner/machiavellis-5-lessons-for-leaders> on 15-06-18
- Ryan, A. (2012). *On Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Skinner, Q.(1981). *Machiavelli*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Souvik, M. (2002). *Niccolo Machiavelli*. Calcutta: Jadavpur University Press.
- Subrata, M. and Sushila R. (2007). *A History of Political Thought: Plato to Marx*. New Delhi: Prentice Hall.