

# ETHICS of LEADERSHIP

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## The Challenge of Ethical & Effective Leadership

As you read the material for our next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the reading:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.

### Reading

- Machiavelli, N. (1988). *The Prince* (Q. Skinner & R. Price, Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1532).

### Background

Niccoló Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in 1532 as a guide for how a ruler can gain and maintain political power. Machiavelli takes a psychological approach to understanding human motivation, focusing on what drives real people to act. In particular, Machiavelli believes that the reasons people act on are **prudential** in nature, meaning that a person most reliably act on reasons that protect or promote his or her own individual self-interest. This view, that a person primarily acts according to prudential reasons, is now known as **psychological egoism**. In this context, Machiavelli suggests that cardinal rule for leaders is to *appear* morally virtuous while in reality doing whatever is necessary—moral or immoral—to maintain power. While Machiavelli is traditionally interpreted as defending tyrannical dictators, this is an unnecessarily narrow understanding. For instance, a noble and beneficent leader could be concerned about losing power to a ruthless tyrant. That is, this wise leader wants to continue governing virtuously, yet must defend herself from a tyrant who has no qualms about lying and cheating his way into power. Even a virtuous leader under such a threat may still appreciate Machiavelli's advice for retaining power. Does that mean that effective leadership is inconsistent with ethics?

### Questions

1. In chapter XV, Machiavelli suggests that he is going to avoid an idealistic account of leadership and instead be realistic. Why does he claim to want to do this?
2. According to Machiavelli, what principle or standard should a leader should use when deciding whether to act according to moral virtue or according to vice? I will call this Machiavelli's *ultimate criterion for pragmatic and prudent leadership*. (Hint: Machiavelli presents this criterion and its rationale in the final paragraph of Chapter XV.)
3. When it comes to Machiavelli's pragmatic virtues for leadership, should a leader be . . .
  - Generous or miserly (Chapter XVI)?
  - Merciful or cruel (Chapter XVII)?
  - Loved or feared (Chapter XVII)?
  - Trustworthy or treacherous (Chapter XVIII)?

How does Machiavelli's answer to these questions employ his criterion for pragmatic and prudential leadership?

4. Throughout this reading, and especially in Chapters XVIII and XIX, Machiavelli repeatedly defends the claim that a ruler need not actually possess moral virtue "but he must certainly seem to" (p. 62). What reasons does Machiavelli give to defend his advocacy of (what we today call) impression management? How does this argument employ his criterion for pragmatic and prudential leadership?