Romeo and Juliet Part I

Machiavelli

Ethics Workbook I: World History, Chapter 10

After about a thousand years of feudalism, people began to question some of its basic ideas. This new period in history is called the Renaissance. It was a time of change in the way people looked at their relationship with the community they lived in. Communalism was losing ground to the idea of *individualism*. Individualism stresses the importance of the individual people and places them above the group. People began to believe that there was nothing wrong with striving to get things for themselves and they became less concerned about their obligations to others.

The Renaissance was the beginning of what we call modern times. We still live in the modern age and our society today still stresses individualism. So, this is a very important idea for us to study. It's a new way to look at life and it changes things a lot.

All through the Middle Ages it was assumed that, for the most part at least, people try to do the right thing. In other words, people were by nature basically good. This was one idea that was seriously questioned by Renaissance thinkers. One famous philosopher at this time was an Italian named Nicolo Machiavelli. He wrote a book called *The Prince* which gave advice to political leaders. Let's see what Machiavelli said about the natural goodness of people.

In general, people are ungrateful, unreliable, false, cowardly and greedy. They will promise you anything and then turn their back on you if things go wrong. And don't think that the person who is closest to you is more reliable. Friendship is based on obligations and people break obligations most easily.

Nicolo Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVI simplified

What to do you think? Are people basically good or basically bad? Is Machiavelli right?

Now, if you believe that people are the way Machiavelli says they are, your ideas about right and wrong will change.

Machiavelli wrote his book as a guide for the leader of his country. He believed that the government should not have to play by the same rules as ordinary people because the government cannot afford to lose. Do you think governments should have the same standards of right and wrong as ordinary citizens? What about when governments deal with foreign countries?



Here is some of what Machiavelli wrote:

Everyone says that the leader should be honest and trustworthy and not be sneaky. But it's easy to see that in the past leaders who get things done have paid little or no attention to this idea. They have simply outsmarted the others, especially those who keep their word. We all know that there are two ways of getting what you want. The first is through the rules and the second is to take it by force. The leader must do both. The leader should be half lion and half fox. The lion can't see the traps and the fox can't fight off the wolves. Great leaders don't rely on either one or the other, but use both. Therefore, the wise leaders do not keep their word if it will hurt them or prevent them from getting what they want.

If people were good, this rule would not hold. But, because they are bad and will lie and cheat you, you are not obligated to be fair and honest with them.

But, it is necessary to disguise your dishonesty and to pretend to be good. People like to think that they are upright, and they are very easy to trick. You must appear to be virtuous, but only a fool actually is virtuous. Pretend to be kind, reliable, fair, honest and loyal. But be ready to do the exact opposite, as long as you don't get caught. It's always best to stay with the good if you can, but only if it works, if not, you must be ready to change tactics. Remember, people must believe you are virtuous, so never give any hint that you are not. People only see what you show them, not what's really there.

Nicolo Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVIII simplified

What was Machiavelli's opinion of hypocrisy?

It seems that winning is the most important thing for Machiavelli. How important is winning in the things that you do? Does the urge to win sometimes lead to unethical actions? Can you give any examples from your own experiences? Machiavelli seems different from earlier writers, but there is a very basic way in which he is identical to all the others. Reread the following sentence. See if you can figure it out? Why does he tell people to lie and cheat? What basic principle of ethics is he using?

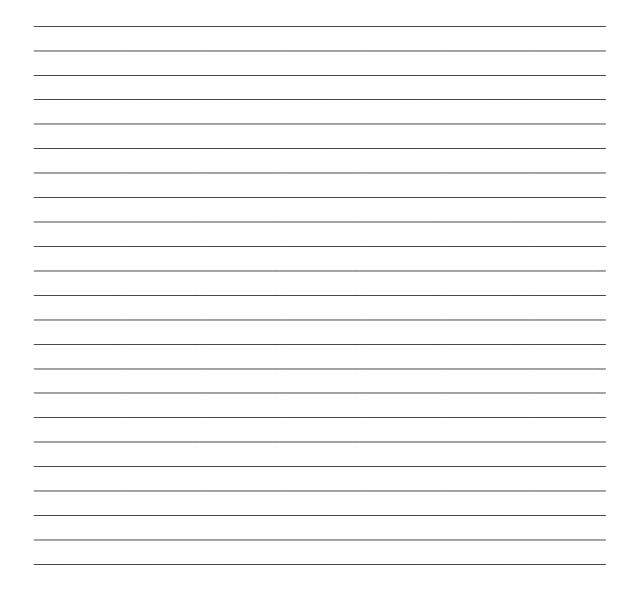
If people were good this rule would not hold, but because they are bad, and will lie and cheat you, you are not obligated to be fair and honest with them. Nicolo Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVIII simplifed

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Romeo and Juliet Part II

Feudalism can be seen as a system of private contracts and personal relationships acting to provide public services and duties. At the end of the Middle Ages, a more impersonal, public, governmental idea was gradually emerging with the rise of monarchies and the subsequent development of democracy in some parts of Europe. In the play, there are numerous examples of this transition from a private, and hence medieval, concept of government and the modern idea of public responsibility. As you read ROMEO AND JULIET, pay special attention to the words and actions of Prince Escalus and identify several examples of the struggle between these two ideas.

What is the relationship between the "rule of law" as represented by the Prince and the "rule of men" as represented by the feuding families of Verona? List direct quotes from the play and then interpret them in short paragraphs. Find at least three examples.





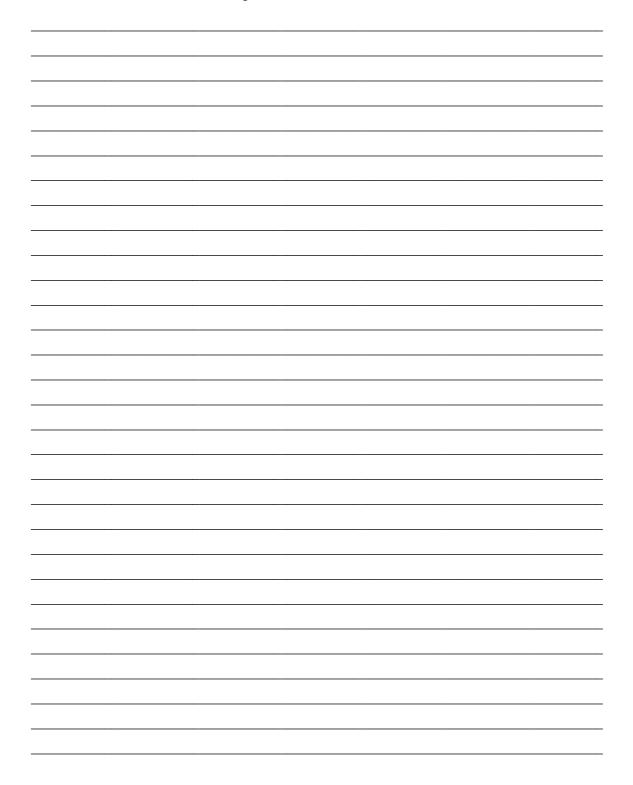
Now let's see what Machiavelli says in a chapter of his book called: "Concerning Cruelty And Clemency, And Whether It Is Better To Be Loved Than Feared." Read it carefully and use it to establish standards for judging the actions of Prince Escalus of Verona. *What would Machiavelli have told the Prince to do?*

Coming now to the other qualities mentioned above, I say that every prince ought to desire to be considered clement and not cruel. Nevertheless he ought to take care not to misuse this clemency. Cesare Borgia was considered cruel; notwithstanding, his cruelty reconciled the Romagna, unified it, and restored it to peace and loyalty. And if this be rightly considered, he will be seen to have been much more merciful than the Florentine people, who, to avoid a reputation for cruelty, permitted Pistoia to be destroyed. Therefore a prince, so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal, ought not to mind the reproach of cruelty; because with a few examples he will be more merciful than those who, through too much mercy, allow disorders to arise, from which follow murders or robberies; for these are wont to injure the whole people, whilst those executions which originate with a prince offend the individual only. ...

Nevertheless he ought to be slow to believe and to act, nor should he himself show fear, but proceed in a temperate manner with prudence and humanity, so that too much confidence may not make him incautious and too much distrust render him intolerable.

Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with. Because this is to be asserted in general of men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life and children, as is said above, when the need is far distant; but when it approaches they turn against you. And that prince who, relying entirely on their promises, has neglected other precautions, is ruined; because friendships that are obtained by payments, and not by greatness or nobility of mind, may indeed be earned, but they are not secured, and in time of need cannot be relied upon; and men have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails. ...

Nicolo Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVII



Final Assessment Essay:

Read Lady Capulet's words as she laments the death of Tybalt and then urges the Prince to execute Romeo. What seems to be motivating her?

LADY CAPULET

Tybalt, my cousin! O my brother's child! O prince! O cousin! husband! O, the blood is spilt O my dear kinsman! Prince, as thou art true, For blood of ours, shed blood of Montague. O cousin, cousin!

LADY CAPULET

He is a kinsman to the Montague; Affection makes him false; he speaks not true: Some twenty of them fought in this black strife, And all those twenty could but kill one life. I beg for justice, which thou, prince, must give; Romeo slew Tybalt, Romeo must not live.

Machiavelli would probably have agreed with Lady Capulet that Romeo should be executed, but for entirely different reasons. Write an essay in which you predict how Machiavelli would have responded to Lady Capulet's plea.



