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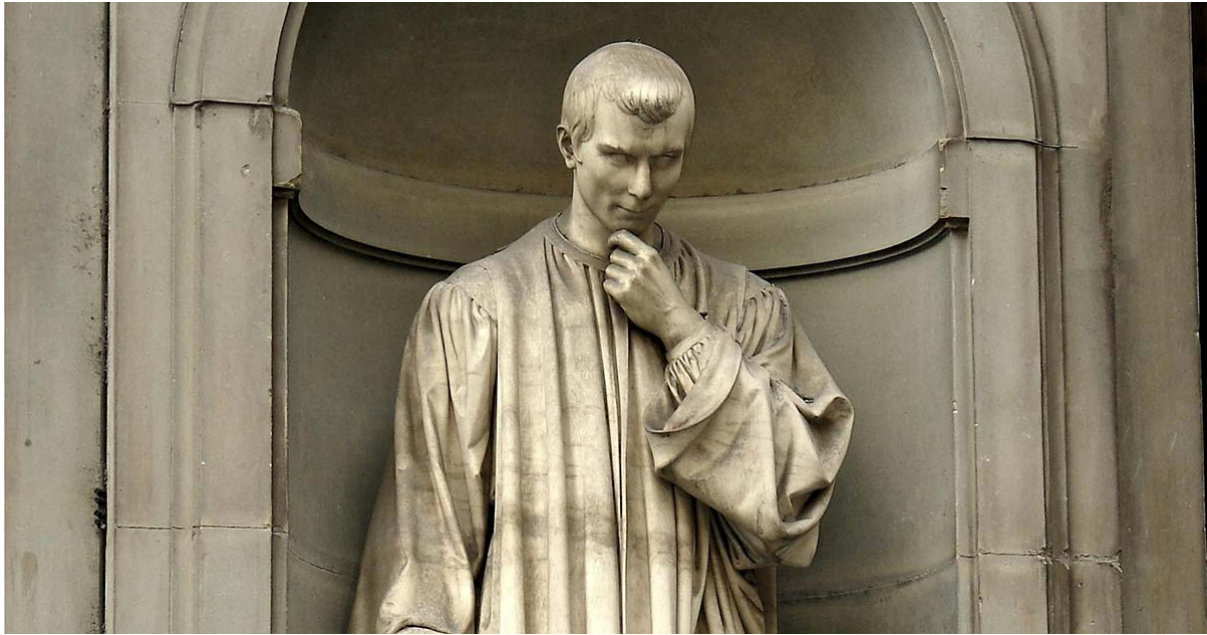
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# Can Machiavellianism Be Used For Good In The Modern World?

## The case for pragmatic morality

By Jamie Ryder

When you hear the word Machiavellian, what comes to mind? A corrupt and ruthless politician doing whatever it takes to get ahead? A form of manipulation? These are common associations with the 16<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli and his perspective on the ends justifying the means.

Hundreds of years later, Machiavelli's ideas endure. His logic resurfaces whenever leaders face crises, institutions bend under pressure and individuals decide that telling the whole truth may cause more harm than good or choose to act within the reality of their situation.

Here lies an interesting and perhaps uncomfortable question: Can Machiavellian reasoning ever be used for good in the modern world, and if so, under what constraints?

To answer the question, this paper doesn't attempt to cast Machiavelli as a moral hero but ground his ideas within the context of their time and examine the ethical applications they have in the modern day. Put another way, an exploration of what might be called Machiavellian ethics: the belief that ethical intention must be matched with situational awareness, and the responsibility includes understanding the consequences of action and inaction alike.

## Machiavelli in his own time

Machiavelli's philosophy is often caricatured as manipulative and cynical; with his most famous work *The Prince* being seen as a guide for tyranny and how to be evil for the sake of

being evil. This is an oversimplification and there's much more nuance to the themes of *The Prince*.

Machiavelli was concerned with realism over idealism, summed up with the quote "how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation." As nice as it would be for a ruler to behave kindly towards their subjects and allies all the time, that wasn't how the real world worked for Machiavelli.

He wrote in a world that lacked stable democracies and international law. The city-states of Renaissance Italy rose and fell rapidly, and political failure often meant either exile, imprisonment or execution. So, in this environment, moral consistency could be a liability.

Two important ideas defined Machiavelli's ethical reasoning:

### ***Virtù***

Not to be confused with virtue. *Virtù* for Machiavelli meant strength, ingenuity, psychological realism and a willingness to act decisively.

That's not to say Machiavelli didn't think values and morals were irrelevant. He believed that values were fragile when incentives contradicted them. In his mind, fear of loss, status, safety, income and belonging tended to outweigh abstract commitment to virtue.

### ***Fortuna***

The force of unpredictability that changes lives on a whim. Machiavelli believed *fortuna* could be controlled by embracing *virtù*.

## What has changed in the modern world?

Machiavelli assumed a political environment in which order was fragile, external threat was constant and moral restraint was rarely reciprocated. In that context, deception, coercion and cruelty, when used sparingly, could preserve political order by preventing collapse. The ruler's primary task was to keep the state intact long enough for civic life to exist at all.

Modern societies are built on a different concept of order. In an ideal world, a modern society might be built on trust in systems and processes that operate beyond any single individual rather than being maintained through fear or personal authority. In the real world, there are still regimes that operate like the latter instead of the former.

But generally, modern societies can access mechanisms that the people of Machiavelli's time couldn't. These include:

- Legal accountability: the expectation that power is constrained by law and subject to review.
- Democratic legitimacy: the belief that authority comes from consent and not force.
- Media scrutiny: The assumption that power will be exposed if abused.
- International ethical norms: Shared limits of acceptable conduct even in conflict.

These mechanisms are procedural and psychological. They function because people believe the rules are broadly real, fair and applied. Order in the modern sense is therefore normative as much as institutional. It survives only as long as citizens, employees, soldiers and officials believe that truth matters, rules are not purely instrumental, and violations are exceptional rather than routine.

## The problem with habitual Machiavellianism

In Machiavelli's time, deception could stabilise order because there was little expectation of transparency and rulers were openly strategic. For example, Machiavelli wrote extensively on the exploits of the Medici family and Cesare Borgia and his admiration for their ruthless tactics in what he saw as the pursuit of preventing rebellions and consolidating authority long enough to restore order through control.

Today, those same tactics produce the opposite effect. When Machiavellian reasoning becomes habitual rather than exceptional it may solve immediate problems. But in the long term, it threatens the invisible architecture that makes order possible.

This might happen in several stages:

1. Normalising deception: When leaders or institutions mislead 'for good reasons' deception becomes the norm and citizens learn not to ask whether they are being lied to, but why.
2. Incentivised cynicism: As deception is normalised, trust collapses. Those inside systems learn that appearances matter more than reality and those outside assume all official narratives are self-serving.
3. Institutional decay: Institutions may continue to function while losing moral authority. The only reason laws are followed is because they are enforced.
4. Moral slippage: Each 'necessary' Machiavellian act lowers the barrier to the next. What was once justified by a crisis becomes justified by convenience.

Thus, the critical difference between Machiavelli's time and ours is that order today depends less on fear of power and more on faith in restraint. The danger of habitual Machiavellianism is the gradual rotting of integrity – a condition in which institutions continue to exist while belief in them is compromised, or individuals sacrifice their moral compass and actively and deliberately harm others with their actions.

## Ethical perceptions of Machiavellianism

It's useful to weigh the principles of Machiavelli's philosophy against other schools of thought that don't automatically condemn such behaviour, but consider intent, consequences and relational context.

### **Virtue ethics**

Virtue ethics evaluates actions based on the moral character of the agent and the cultivation of virtues and not just on consequences alone. Key virtues include courage, honesty, temperance and justice.

Machiavellian tactics of deception and manipulation typically conflict with these values. However, virtue ethicists may recognise situations where harsh action is morally necessary to prevent greater harm such as lying to protect innocent lives.

A virtuous agent can also act harshly without being cruel and knowing the difference is important. In virtue ethics, morality is about who you are becoming and not just what you do. A harsh action may be severe and morally uncomfortable, but it can still be consistent with virtue if done for a just reason and not motivated by malice or ego.

Cruelty, on the other hand, is not about the severity of the action but the disposition behind it. A cruel person takes pleasure in harm and is indifferent to the suffering of others. So, the distinction here is between necessary severity and character corruption. A virtuous person may carry out a painful decision like firing an employee or holding back truth in a crisis, while remaining fundamentally compassionate and just.

### **Care ethics**

Care ethics emphasises relationships and the responsibilities we owe to those who we're connected with. Ethical judgment is relational and not abstract. It considers questions like who is vulnerable, who depends on who, what relationship harm might happen and what relational good is being preserved.

Based on these questions, Machiavellian deception may be permissible within the lens of care ethics if it protects someone from unnecessary harm, buys time to stabilise a fragile situation, stops a crisis from escalating or preserves the long-term integrity of a care network. The key here is that the intent is protective and not used for personal gain.

Care ethics is also highly sensitive to the power imbalances that may occur in a Machiavellian situation. Especially if one party has more information, authority or leverage because being deceptive risks exploitation. In this situation, are you using informational advantage to protect the vulnerable or are you doing it deepen their dependence on you?

Another important point is that care ethics asks what happens after harm has been prevented, not just if it's been stopped. Ethical responsibility continues beyond the moment of action. This means that for any Machiavellian strategy to be permitted within care ethics it needs to be blended with an awareness of vulnerability, genuine concern for how others feel, an acknowledgement of relationship damage and a willingness to carry responsibility.

Based on these comparisons, I would suggest that for Machiavelli's philosophy to be ethically applied to the modern world it must be:

- Conditional: Triggered only by a genuine and demonstrable crisis.
- Exceptional: Clearly distinguished from normal governance.
- Transparent in retrospect: Subject to explanation and accountability.
- Restorative: Normal ethical standards are restored immediately afterward.

## Conclusion

An eternal truth is the world is unpredictable and the *fortuna* Machiavelli wrote about is still here. Disasters happen and leaders face tragic trade-offs. Everyone has moments of uncertainty and bouts of weighing the consequences of our choices.

Machiavelli teaches us that if nothing else we need to see the world as it is, not as we wish it to be sometimes, and that history is instructive for this lesson. He once wrote “I go into my study...I put on regal and curial robes; and dressed in a more appropriate manner I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men and am welcomed by them kindly...and there I am not ashamed to speak to them, to ask them the reasons for their actions, and they, in their humanity, answer me.”

I find this image instructive because Machiavelli treated the past as a dialogue. He entered the “ancient courts” to question and to understand and to test ideas against human reality. We can do the same. We don’t have to accept Machiavellianism wholesale, and we don’t have to dismiss it completely. We can take away what’s relevant like the realism about human incentives and the importance of being able to adapt to uncertainty.

Machiavelli’s thinking into necessity and unpredictability can make our situational awareness stronger, while virtue and accountability can keep us grounded against corruption. In this way, moral principles are our foundation, and pragmatic reasoning is a tool to use when needed.

## Four Machiavellian Situations To Consider

I now invite you to think about one or more of these situations that apply Machiavellian tactics and whether you would consider them ethical.

### **Situation 1: Operation Fortitude in World War 2**

The Allies deliberately misled Nazi Germany about the timing and location of D-Day. It relied on fictional armies, dummy equipment and a large network of double agents.

Why could this be Machiavellian?

Operation Fortitude involved the large-scale deception of countries and reflected a Machiavellian principle that people are persuaded less by truth than what appears plausible to their expectations. Also, the double agents involved knowingly took part and accepted the reality that if they were discovered they could be tortured or killed.

Do you think this is an ethical situation and if so, why?

### **Situation 2: Edward Snowden becomes a whistle blower against the National Security Agency (NSA)**

Edward Snowden, a US intelligence contractor, leaked classified documents in 2013 exposing a mass surveillance programme run by the NSA. The documents revealed that NSA

were gathering user data without consent from tech companies like Meta and Google for their own purposes.

Why could this be Machiavellian?

Snowden engaged in planned misdirection. He manipulated institutional trust by using false pretences to access classified information and he strategically selected journalists to share the information rather than release the information indiscriminately.

He also influenced public perception about his motives and aimed to control his narrative. Snowden did this by escaping to Russia and framing himself as a reluctant exile, not a political defector.

Do you believe this is an ethical situation and if so, why?

### **Situation 3: Managing up to frame the truth strategically**

Managing up is the practice of adjusting how information is presented to senior leaders. Imagine you're presenting a complex issue to your manager at work. You believe this will trigger defensiveness based on their personality. So, you frame the truth in a way that aligns with their priorities, even if it leaves out emotionally inconvenient details.

Why could this be Machiavellian?

Machiavelli insists leaders must be understood as they are, not as they should be. Managing up accepts that power distorts perception and authority doesn't guarantee wisdom. The practitioner is also controlling a narrative through emotional framing and emphasis.

Do you believe this is an ethical situation and if so, why?

### **Situation 4: A controlled illusion within parenting**

A seven-year-old child asks why their granddad is in hospital and whether they are going to die. The parent knows the granddad has terminal cancer and likely has months to live. The child is naturally anxious and struggles at school.

Instead of explaining the full details the parent says "Granddad is very sick, but the doctors are helping him to feel comfortable. We're going to focus on spending a good time with him." This causes the child to relax.

Weeks later, when the granddad dies, the child is shocked and confused. Their response is "you said the doctors were helping granddad. I thought he was going to get better."

Why could this be considered Machiavellian?

The parent intentionally withheld information to selectively shape how their child perceived a situation. They acknowledge that this choice carries an emotional cost and acted with necessity in the moment.

Do you believe this is an ethical situation and if so, why?

## Additional questions to think about

If there is time, consider discussing these questions in your groups:

Can you think of any other perspectives that agree or disagree with Machiavellian thinking?

Is fear ever a legitimate tool for maintaining order?

Is moral consistency always a strength or can it sometimes be a weakness?

Would you rather be led by someone virtuous but ineffective or morally flexible and effective?

Is moral outrage often a luxury of those not responsible for outcomes?

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