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Machiavelli, Bacon, Chesterfield

Being a capable leader requires a myriad of virtues, among them intelligence, oratory, and fortitude. According to Machiavelli, Francis Bacon, and Lord Chesterfield, it also requires the wisdom to seek and take the counsel of others.

In Chapter 23 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes that a prince who is wise of his own accord would choose counsel from a select few men. He tempers that with the idea that a wise prince should only call upon the advice of his counsel for variety in perspective and be “obstinate” in his decisions- making choices by himself and standing by them. The advice a wise prince is to receive, in Machiavelli’s perspective, is merely for guidance. Machiavelli warns that a prince who fails to seek such guidance could fall prey to flatterers, who simply tell you what you want to hear, or, like Maximillian, be so secretive and weak-willed that his plans, once finally revealed, are opposed, and then changed due the nature of his flimsy will.

Machiavelli believes that a leader must be wise in his own right and that his ability to be decisive must not arise from the counsel of other wise men, but rather he should invite advice from other men whom he respects, and perhaps other people respect as well. A “prudent prince” must find a perfect balance between not being offended when told the truth and allowing just anyone to have the “freedom to speak the truth to him.” The former will prevent a leader from taking in wise counsel, and the latter will result in a loss of reverence from his subjects. Machiavelli believes a wise prince should not desire or need to hear what everyone has to say but also must not ignore everyone and “move directly” to further his own agenda.

In reflecting on Maximillian, the emperor of the time, Machiavelli notes that Maximillian lacks the ability to seek advice at all and that, rather than making him strong, his secretive nature makes him weak. Machiavelli references this tension often - that a leader cannot be too willing to listen to anyone and what they have to say but they must also be able to listen to and accept advice from certain people with whom they surround themselves. He uses Maximillian as an example of a leader who accepts explicit advice from no one. Machiavelli characterizes this solitude not as strength in the leader but as simply stubbornness and folly. Maximillian is not wise enough to seek counsel and not wise enough to stay steadfast in his decisions. Machiavelli warns against both of these behaviors as being unbecoming of a wise leader.

Finally, Machiavelli claims that “men will always turn out bad for you unless they have been made good by necessity.” This is to say that men will always have an agenda of their own to further unless you make it so that they are incentivized to further your agenda instead. Machiavelli also warns that if a prince relies too much on the guidance of one counsellor, he makes himself vulnerable to that individual taking away the prince’s power. This is another tension that Machiavelli identifies and underlies the advice to seek advice from a few wise men, but to act decisively on his own resolve.

Machiavelli writes that a leader, should “discourage everyone from counseling him...he should be a very broad questioner… a patient listener to the truth;” which is to say that unsolicited advice should not be welcomed by a leader. Machiavelli claims that unsolicited counseling comes unto a leader who cannot defend his own ideas. While I agree with Machiavelli’s belief that a leader should seek advice but not rely solely on the thoughts of other people, I think that Machiavelli’s claims might vary depending on the kind of leader we are considering. A royal leader, such as a prince, might be guided more by these words has he also has to keep up the pretense of “majesty”. In other words, a prince is going to care a lot more about being revered by the people as this is how he maintains his power. On the other hand, a leader in a democratic state is supposed to be the voice of the people and needs the support of those same people to stay in power. Therefore, the counsel that he seeks must also reflect the thoughts and desires of those he leads, so he might need to select a broader spectrum of counsellors than a prince. A leader might also be vulnerable in entirely ignoring unsolicited counsel because they might be deafened by an echo-chamber of self-selected advice givers and ignore guidance from other voices that could reveal the best strategies – ideas that are then given to those who might oppose the leader and challenge them for control.

Bacon echoes many of Machiavelli’s ideas in Bacon’s essay, “Of Counsel”. In the first paragraph he states, “[t]he wisest princes need not think it any diminution to their greatness, or derogation to their sufficiency, to rely upon counsel.” To which he compares the likeness of a prince accepting counsel to that of God, who too must seek advice from outside sources. In comparing a leader seeking advice to God it becomes very evident that Bacon approves of a leader who turns to other wise men for guidance.

Then, Bacon identifies three problems that might arise from seeking counsel and provides the remedy to each. The first problem is that of revealing secrets. On this matter, Bacon’s advice is the same as Machiavelli: A leader must be selective about who to share information with. Bacon writes, “those inward counsellors had need also be wise men, and especially true and trusty to the king’s ends,” which reinforces the same claim Machiavelli had which is to carefully choose who is to be your counsel and see to it that their aim is to assist in your agenda. Second, Bacon claims that it is of concern to a leader that seeking advice would appear to weaken their authority. His remedy is outlined within the Jupiter fable that Bacon recounts in paragraph two of the essay. The idea, which echoes Machiavelli once again, is that counsellors contribute ideas and help the leader gestate them, but the decision must come ultimately only from the leader. The third risk highlighted by Bacon is that counsellors will give advice that benefits themselves only and not the leader, or the greater good. The solution suggested here is being predent by selecting the right counsellors. Bacon invokes that principle that “principis est virtus maxima nosse suos,” - a ruler’s greatest good is knowing his people. This could be interpreted as knowing who it is that you serve like a democratic leader must, but Bacon understands it as knowing one’s advisors and selecting those who will not advise from self-interest.

While Bacon is astute, like Machiavelli, in identifying problems that might arise when a leader seeks advice from others, the solutions that the proposes only solve a portion of the problem. For example, being selective about who to share information with does not entirely eliminate the risk that those you trust with confidential information might either share it or use it against you. Limiting the number of people who know, and being as sure as you can about their trustworthy nature is a good guard against those ills, but this only shrinks the problem, it does not remedy it as Bacon concludes. Similarly, selecting the right counsellors is a weakness in both Machiavelli and Bacon’s guidance as neither writer provides any process for a leader to do so. The presumption that they both make is that a wise leader will know which counselors to select and will choose those that do not just flatter and are not driven by their own agenda. And perhaps leaders have this insight into human nature, but history is littered with the tale of leaders betrayed by those in whom they mistakenly placed trust.

Lord Chesterfield takes a little bit of a different stance when giving advice to his son in his letter of January 15, 1753. He writes that gaining “wordly knowledge” requires one to feign ignorance in nearly all circumstances. Whether it is about a factual inquiry or one of “private scandal”, Chesterfield argues that everyone will then become your advisors, for they love to “tell you what they should not” or “have vanity” in showing that they know something you do not and will share all that they know. Your job then, as the secret leader of the conversation, is to “fish for facts …. Judiciously” to find out as much as possible without making them guarded or allowing them to ramble on and “grow tiresome”. Chesterfield views the knowledge that you gain in such conversations as the tools for battle in the world. In combination with the necessary skills of “constant attention, presence of mind, and coolness”, information is the key to success. For Chesterfield, it seems, believes contrarily that there is no such thing as unsolicited advice, as one who seeks counsel must “embrace the man you hate” to seek that which he knows.

In my opinion, though it would be possible to feign ignorance in the ways that Lord Chesterfield is suggesting, it might not always be as wise as he claims. This goes back to Machiavelli. To constantly be in the dark or to appear in the dark on the topic of matters, whether they be scandal or of concern to a political leader, might threaten to undermine the respect for a leader. Even if a leader is seeking all kinds of knowledge and perspective as Chesterfield suggests, it would not be wise to always “play dumb”. This may make you appear irresponsible, unknowledgeable, or foolish. A leader would want to appear none of these ways if they were wanting to maintain respect. Although knowledge is power, I think Chesterfield’s suggestion of seeming to appear less in the know is only applicable in some situations.

Machiavelli, Bacon, and Chesterfield all grapple with the necessity for a leader to seek the counsel of those around them who can provide some beneficiary wisdom or information to the leader. John Donne suggests that “no man is an island”. A wise leader is required to seek outside opinions and gather information from others. A component of strength in a leader is knowing who to ask, and then, as Machiavelli, Bacon, and Chesterfield all concur, make your own decision.