Philosophy and Film

The Gambler

Machiavelli’s *The Prince*

“And as one examines their actions and lives, one does not see that they had anything else from fortune than the opportunity, which gave them the matter enabling them to introduce any form they pleased. Without that opportunity their virtue of spirit would have been eliminated, and without that irtue the opportunity would have come in vain.” (Prince 23, Chapter 6 Of New Principalities that Are acquired through one’s own Arms and Virtue)

“Consequently, whenever those who are enemies have opportunity to attack, they do so with partisan zeal, and the other defend lukewarmly so that one is in peril along with them. It is however necessary, if one wants to discuss this aspect well, to examine whether these innovators stand by themselves or depend on others; that is, whether to carry out their deed they must beg or indeed can use force. In the first case they always come to ill and never accomplish anything; but when they depend on their own and are able to use force, then it is that they are rarely in peril. From this arises that all armed prophets conquered and unarmed ones were ruined. For besides the things that have been said ,the nature of peoples is variable; and it is easy to persuade them of something, but difficult to keep them in that persuasion.”

(Prince 24, Chapter 6 Of New Principalities that Are acquired through one’s own Arms and Virtue)

“Yet one cannot call it virtue to kill one’s citizens, betray one’s friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory. For, if one considers the virtue of Agathocles in entering into and escaping from dangers, and the greatness of his spirit in enduring and overcoming adversities, one does not see why he has to be judged inferior to any most excellent captain. Nonetheless, his savage cruelty and inhumanity, together with his infinite crimes, do not allow him to be celebrated among the most excellent men. Thus, one cannot attribute to fortune or to virtue what he achieved without either.” (Prince 35, Chapter 8, Of Those Who have Attained a Principality through crimes)

“But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not sue it according to necessity.” (Prince 61, Chapter 15, Of Those Things for Which Men And Especially Princes Are Praised or Blamed).

“For one can say this generally of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, pretenders and dissemblers, evaders of danger, eager for gain. While you do them good, they are yours, offering you their blood, property, lives, and children, as I said above, when the need for them is far away; but, when it is close to you, they revolt. And that prince who has founded himself entirely on their words, stripped of other preparation, is ruined; for friendships that are acquired at a price and not with greatness and nobility of spirit are bought, but they are not owned and when the time comes they cannot be spent. And men have less hesitation to offend one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared; for love is held by a chain of obligation, which, because men are wicked, is broken at every opportunity for their own utility, but fear is held by a dread of punishment that never forsakes you.” (Prince, 67, Chapter 17, Of Cruelty and Mercy, and Whether It Is Better to Be Loved Than Feared, or the Contrary)

“Men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands, because seeing is given to everyone touching to a few. Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are; and these few dare not oppose the opinion of many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them…For the vulgar are taken in by appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar; the few have a place there when the many have somewhere to lean on.” (Prince 71, Chapter 18, In What Modes Faith Should be Kept by Princes).

**Chapter 25**

**How Much Fortune Can Do in Human Affairs, and what Mode it May Be Opposed**

It is not unknown to me that many have held and hold the

opinion that worldly things are so governed by fortune and

by God, that men cannot correct them with their prudence,

indeed that they have no remedy at all; and on account of

this they might judge that one need not sweat much over

things but let oneself be governed by chance. This opinion

has been believed more in our times because of the great

variability of things which have been seen and are seen

every day, beyond every human conjecture. When I have

thought about this sometimes, I have been in some part

inclined to their opinion. Nonetheless, so that our free will

not be eliminated, I judge that it might be true that fortune

is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the

other half, or close to it, for us to govern. And I liken her

to one of these violent rivers which, when they become

enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and the buildings, lift

earth from this part, drop in another; each person flees before

them, everyone yields to their impetus without being able

to hinder them in any regard. And although they are like

this, it is not as if men, when times are quiet, could not

provide for them with dikes and dams so that when they rise

later, either they go by a canal or their impetus is neither

so wanton nor so damaging. It happens similarly with

fortune, which demonstrates her power where virtue

has not been put in orderl to resist her and therefore

turns her impetus where she knows that dams and dikes

1. lit.: ordered.

have not been made to contain her. And if you consider

Italy, which is the seat of these variations and that which has

given them motion, you will see2 a country without dams

and without any dike. If it had been diked by suitable virtue,

like Germany, Spain, and France, either this flood would

not have brought the great variations that it has, or it would

not have come here.

And I wish that this may be enough to have said about

opposing fortune in general. 3 But restricting myself more to

particulars, I say that one sees a given prince be happy

today and come to ruin tomorrow without having seen him

change his nature or any quality. This I believe arises, first,

from the causes that have been discussed at length in the

preceding, that is, that the prince who leans entirely on his

fortune comes to ruin as it varies. I believe, further, that he is

happy who adapts his mode of proceeding to the qualities of

the times; and similarly, he is unhappy whose procedure is in

disaccord with the times. For one sees that in the things that

lead men to the end that each has before him, that is, glories

and riches, they proceed variously: one with caution,4 the

other with impetuosity; one by violence, the other with

art; one with patience, the other with its contrary-and

with these different modes each can attain it. One also sees

two cautious persons, one attaining his plan, the other

not; and similarly two persons are equally happy with two

different methods, one being cautious, the other impetuous.

This arises from nothing other than from the quality of

the times that they conform to or not in their procedure.

From this follows what I said, that two persons working

differently come out with the same effect; and of two

persons working identically, one is led to his end, the

2. Both you 's in this sentence are the fonnal or plural you.

3. lit.: universal.

4. lit.: respect; respetto is translated usually as "caution" and "hesitation,"

occasionally as "regard."

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other not. On this also depends the variability of the good:

for if one governs himself with caution and patience, and the

times and affairs turn in such a way that his government

is good, he comes out happy; but if the times and affairs

change, he is ruined because he does not change his mode of

proceeding. Nor may a man be found so prudent as to know

how to accommodate himself to this, whether because he

cannot deviate from what nature inclines him to or also

because, when one has always flourished by walking on one

path, he cannot be persuaded to depart from it. And so the

cautious man, when it is time to come to impetuosity, does

not know how to do it, hence comes to ruin: for if he would

change his nature with the times and with affairs, his fortune

would not change.

Pope Julius II proceeded impetuously in all his affairs,

and he found the times and affairs so much in conformity

with his mode of proceeding that he always achieved a

happy end. Considers the first enterprise that he undertook

in Bologna, while Messer Giovanni Bentivoglio was still

living. The Venetians were not content with it; nor was the

king of Spain; with France he was holding discussions6 on

that enterprise; and nonetheless, with his ferocity and impetuosity,

he personally put that expedition into motion.

This move made Spain and the Venetians stand still in suspense,

the latter out of fear and the other because of the

desire he had to recover the whole kingdom of Naples.

From the other side he pulled the king of France after him;

because when that king saw him move, and since he desired

to make Julius his friend in order to bring down the Venetians,

he judged he could not deny him his troops without

injuring him openly. Julius thus accomplished with his impetuous

move what no other pontiff, with all human prudence,

would ever have accomplished, because if he had

5. The formal or plural you should be understood here.

6. lit.: reasonings.

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waited to depart from Rome with firm conclusions and

everything in order, as any other pontiff would have done,

he would never have succeeded. For the king of France

would have had a thousand excuses and the others would

have raised in him a thousand fears. I wish to omit all his

other actions, since all have been alike and all succeeded

well. And the brevity of his life did not allow him to feel the

contrary, because if times had come when he had needed to

proceed with caution, his ruin would have followed: he

would never have deviated from those modes to which

nature inclined him.7

I conclude, thus, that when fortune varies and men

remain obstinate in their modes, men are happy while they

are in accord, and as they come into discord, unhappy. I

judge this indeed, that it is better to be impetuous than

cautious, because fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if

one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her

down. And one sees that she lets herself be won more by the

impetuous than by those who proceed coldly. And so always,

like a woman, she is the friend of the young, because

they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her

with more audacity.

“The remainder you must do yourself. God does not want to do everything, so as not to take free will from us and that part of the glory falls to us.” (Prince 103, Chapter 26, Exhortation to Seize Italy and to Free Her from the Barbarians)

**Existentialism (The Absurd)**

Because of the world's absurdity, at any point in time, anything can happen to anyone, and a tragic event could plummet someone into direct confrontation with the Absurd. The notion of the Absurd has been prominent in literature throughout history. Many of the literary works of Søren Kierkegaard, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Eugène Ionesco, Luigi Pirandello,[24][25][26][27] Jean-Paul Sartre, Joseph Heller and Albert Camus contain descriptions of people who encounter the absurdity of the world.

It is in relation to the concept of the devastating awareness of meaninglessness that Albert Camus claimed that "there is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" in his The Myth of Sisyphus. Although "prescriptions" against the possibly deleterious consequences of these kinds of encounters vary, from Kierkegaard's religious "stage" to Camus' insistence on persevering in spite of absurdity, the concern with helping people avoid living their lives in ways that put them in the perpetual danger of having everything meaningful break down is common to most existentialist philosophers. The possibility of having everything meaningful break down poses a threat of quietism, which is inherently against the existentialist philosophy.[28] It has been said that the possibility of suicide makes all humans existentialists.[29]

**Albert Camus (The Stranger)**

“You’re young, and it seems to me it’s the kind of life that would appeal to you.” I said yes but that really it was all the same to me. Then he asked me if I wasn’t interested in a change of life. I said that people never change lives, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn’t dissatisfied with mine here at all. He looked upset and told me that I never gave him a straight answer, that I had no ambition, and that that was disastrous in business. So I went back to work. I would rather not have upset him, but I couldn’t see any reason to change my life. Looking back on it, I wasn’t unhappy. When I was a student, I had lots of ambitions like that. But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered” (The Stranger 41)

The trigger gave, I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in that noise, sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started. I shook off the sweat and sun. I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I’d been happy. Then I fired four more times at the motionless body where the bullets lodged without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness. (The Stranger 59)

**“**In a way, they seemed to be arguing the case as if it had nothing to do with me. Everything was happening without my participation. My fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion. There were time when I felt like breaking in on all of them and saying, “Wait a minute! Who’s the accused here? Being the accused counts for something. And I have something to say!” But on second thought, I didn’t have anything to say. Besides, I have to admit that whatever interest you can get people to take in you doesn’t last very long.” (The Stranger 99)

“The papers were always talking about the debt owed to society. According to them, it had to be paid. But that doesn’t speak to the imagination. What really counted was the possibility of escape, a leap to freedom, out of the implacable ritual, a wild run for it that would give whatever chance for hope there was. Of course, hope meant being cut down on some street corner, as you ran like made, by a random bullet. But when I really thought it through, nothing was going to allow me such a luxury. Everything was against it; I would just be caught up in the machinery again” (The Stranger 109)

“Throughout the whole absurd life I’d lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere dep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other peoples deaths or a mother’s love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me when we’re all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him who aso called themselves my brothers?. . . What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn’t cry at his mother’s funeral?” (Stranger 121)

**Gambler Quotes**

“The trouble with writing, if I may bring it up here in the English Department...instead of allowing you all to talk about sexual politics all fucking day long...is that we all do a little of it from time to time, writing, and some of us start to think, delusionally, that well, maybe with a little time, a little peace, a little money in the bank, maybe if we left the old lady and the kids, maybe if we had that room of our own, we might be writers, too. Why do we think that? We accept genius in sports, in painting, as something we cannot do, but it’s no more likely that you can be a writer than you can be an Olympic fucking pole vaulter. Because what you have to be before you try to be a pole vaulter, is a pole vaulter.”

**Descartes Response (Discourse on Method, 1)**

“Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world, for everyone thinks he is so well provided with it that [2] even those who are most difficult to content in all other things do not customarily desire more than they have.1 In this it is improbable that all are deceived; rather,

this testifies that the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false, which is properly what is called good sense or reason, is naturally equal in all men, and thus that the diversity of our opinions arises not because some are more reasonable than others, but only because we conduct our thoughts by different ways, and do not consider the same things. For it is not enough to have a good mind,2 but the principal thing is to apply it well. The greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues, and those who only walk very slowly can advance much further, if they always follow the right path, than those who run and go astray.”

**Existentialism, Acquisition, or Something else?**

“There was a student...just the other day...who said that my problem, if one’s nature is a problem, rather than just problematic, is that I see things in terms of victory or death, and not just victory but total victory. And it’s true: I always have. It’s either victory, or don’t bother. The only thing worth doing is the impossible. Everything else is gray. You’re born...as a man... with the nerves of a soldier, the apprehension of an angel, to lift a phrase, but there is no use for it. Here? Where’s the use for it? You’re set up to be a philosopher or a king or Shakespeare, and this is all they give you? This? Twentyodd years of school which is all instruction in how to be ordinary ...or they’ll fucking kill you, they fucking will, and then it's a career, which is not the same thing as existence... I want unlimited things. I want everything. A real love. A real house. A real thing to do...every day. I'd rather die if I don't get it.” (The Gambler)