

# Ethics Workbook I: World History

## Chapter 10

### Renaissance

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

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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?*

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