



Full Length Article

Ethics and strategy: A communication response to Machiavelli's *The Prince* in Baltasar Gracián's *A pocket oracle*



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1. Introduction

While Machiavelli's *The Prince* is usually presented as a main example of proto-PR in the PR literature (Bailey, 2013; Harris, Moss, & Vetter, 1999; Moore, 2011), it is surprising that this work is often ignored in a number of books from the 16th and 17th centuries that discuss the relationship between communication and power. And there are hundreds of them, because political science in these centuries was principally about learning the art of or learning a set of techniques that enable men to manage and manipulate reality to achieve their goals, in part through the management of communication.

Cantarino (1996), who catalogs and classifies a number of works written in the 17th century against the Florentine secretary, argues that their main motivation was the fact that *The Prince* had been condemned by the Church as an example of secular thought which subordinated Church morals to state needs. Machiavelli's indifference toward the morality of the means used by rulers to achieve their political goals, what he called the *ragion di stato* (reason of state), or the maintenance and increase of power, was considered unacceptable by the political thinkers of this era.

Most of these books are written in Spain, whose empire led the counter-reform movement that resuscitated a moral concern in politics, under the influence of Giovanni Botero's work *Della ragion di stato* (1589). Spanish political thinkers attacked Machiavelli because of the subordination of religion to politics with the purpose of maintaining power, as well as for the use illegitimate methods to conserve that political power. However, aware of the triumph of Machiavelli's methods, these Baroque thinkers also tried to reconcile moral principles with pragmatic methods to prioritize the *razón de estado*.

Cantarino (1996) identifies at least 26 political authors whose work exalted princes who followed Christian principles and methods to retain power and wrote books with titles like *Treaty of the religion and virtues that the Christian prince must have to rule and maintain his states. Against what Machiavelli and the politicians of this time have taught by de Rivadeneira (1595) or Destroyed Machiavellism by the Christian wisdom of Spain and Austria. Political-Christian discourse to the Catholic*

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majesty of Philip IV, King of Spains (1628) by Claudio Clemente. These titles show a clear anti-Machiavellic sentiment as well as a will to praise the Spanish monarchs and the Christian principles in their way of doing politics.

Among this group, Baltasar Gracián's *The art of wordly wisdom: A pocket oracle* (1992 [1647]) is probably the most universal. This book was written in an elegant aphoristic and conceptual style that engages Machiavelli in a dialogue and accepts his realistic approach to politics at the same time that it reconciles that approach with moral virtues. Like Machiavelli, Gracián emphasizes the use of communication to retain or expand power through deeds, message content and the personality and even *likability* of the sender of the message.

In their biography of Baltasar Gracián, Sánchez Laila and Laplana Gil, (2014) describe him as a Jesuit priest who was one of the most representative writers of the Spanish Baroque literary style known as *conceptismo*. His ambition was to become a preceptor of the royal son Baltasar Carlos after the praise that his father, Philip IV, had given his book *The complete gentleman* (1646). He was a confessor and advisor to the Duque de Nocera and other individuals in positions of power. His writing style consists of short sentences that are rich in word games and witty associations between words and ideas. The outcome is a laconic and aphoristic style than conveys a number of meanings. As with any Baroque author, Gracián is pessimistic and sees the world as a hostile environment where appearances prevail upon truth and virtue. In his descriptions, human beings come up as weak, malicious and interested. His works, such as *El héroe* (The hero) (1637), *El político* (The Politician King Ferdinand the Catholic) (1640), *El discreto* (The complete gentleman) (1646) and *The pocket oracle* itself provide the reader with the abilities and resources to face life's difficulties. For that purpose, individuals must be prudent and use the wisdom that comes from experience, and pretend and behave according to each occasion.

Gracián's view on communications reflects his conception of the world. Cantarino (2001) argues that Gracián's thought is an outcome of the technical and practical character of politics during the 16th and 17th centuries. Most Spanish political writers of this era used *razón de estado*, conceived as a number of measures discovered by human reason through the involvement of faith, to fight the *ragion di stato* (reason of state) founded by Machiavelli.

Nonetheless, despite Gracián's antagonism against Machiavelli, his political realism has been interpreted from within Machiavellian parameters. Some critics have defined Gracián as a "Machiavelli with a Jesuit cassock" (Costa, 1884) or "an advantageous disciple of the writer from Florence" (Silió & Goicoechea, 1941). Martín and San Emeterio (2014) compare Gracián to Machiavelli in their pessimistic view of humans. Not surprisingly, and although *The pocket oracle* has, at least in theory, a more ethical approach than *The prince* to the use of communication and power, we find examples in Gracián of how to take advantage of others (aphorisms 84, 144), concessions to hypocrisy and lying (75, 106, 130, 140), selfishness (111, 189) or indifference toward the misfortune of others (96, 163). For Livosky (1997), Gracián, who believes if the state adheres to the principles of the Church then anything is permissible, can also be seen as somebody who tries to reconcile the brutal methods necessary to acquire and maintain power with the moral teachings of the Church.

Although unknown in the PR arena until now, *The pocket oracle* has certainly been a relevant book for company managers across the world and more specifically American managers. Indeed, this book sold 200,000 copies when it was republished in 1992 and was included on the list of *New York Times* bestsellers. It is often recommended in business schools for company managers not only because it offers valuable and timeless tips on personal coaching but also because its advice is useful for building any organization's reputation. In Maurer's words, "it provides advice not only for modern "image makers" and "spin doctors," but also for the candid: for those who insist that substance, not *image*, is what really matters" (Maurer, 1992, p. v–vi). Indeed, his aphorism 130, "do but also seem" would appear to permeate the philosophy of the entire book.

I argue that *The pocket oracle* is part of the PR proto-history and can be considered a strategic communication book whose advice applies to managers and politicians as well as entire organizations and brands concerned about building a reputation. I argue that despite all the criticisms of being a Machiavellian, Gracián's work is able to combine ethical behavior and appreciation for substance that are absent in *The Prince*.

2. A review of *The pocket oracle* from a communication perspective

The pocket oracle is a book about how to build a reputation through prudence, control of passions, wisdom, deeds, care of appearances and especially self-knowledge. It is about the self-control and careful planning that allow princes, kings and politicians to manage their passions in order to achieve their goals. Those goals are usually to maintain or gain power through reputation. If strategic communication can be defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3), then *The pocket oracle* is a book on strategic communication because Gracián believes anything we do or say builds our reputation, which is the key to opening the door to triumph. Having a good reputation requires that our deeds, messages and appearances are the product of a deliberate effort, although this should not have to be necessarily noticeable by others. "Never reveal the final stratagems of your art. Great teachers are subtle about the way they reveal their subtleties" (aphorism 212) (Gracián, [1647] 1992, p. 120).

Reputation building requires a sort of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities/threats) analysis. It requires a careful analysis of ourselves, especially our strengths and weaknesses, as well as our audiences: "the self-domain from the old norm 'beating yourself,' self-control, knowing yourself – especially the defects – and know in detail the circumstances – to unveil appearances – to dominate the conceptual axis that articulate most of *The pocket oracle*" (Bernat & Madroñal, 2003; p. 21).

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