

# Reflections on morality in Renaissance thought

Vasil Gluchman

## Abstract

We can read about the morality of that time in works by authors who describe or criticize the conduct and activity of the members of those classes taking the lead in the morality of that time. Thus, we can find a lot of information about ancient Greece and its morality in Plato's presentation of Socrates, Peter Abelard presenting the Middle Ages, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Niccolo Machiavelli, Baldesar Castiglione, but even also Slovak authors such as Martin Rakovský and Juraj Koppay presenting very interesting contemporary facts about the Renaissance.

**Keywords:** Renaissance, morality, Erasmus, Machiavelli, Castiglione, Rakovský, Koppay

## Introduction

Each period of time has classes, estates or groups of people determining the standards of conduct and activity, including moral norms and rules valid and accepted in a particular time. Free citizens in ancient Greece, the clergy in the early Middle Ages, later monarchs, this role was performed by aristocratic courts and courtiers during the Renaissance and humanism, the bourgeoisie and its morality in modern times, capitalists in the time of the development of capitalism, etc. In the recent information age, the role is performed by the media and media stars, whether real or just imaginary, or one-timers (Gluchman, 2008, pp. 234–245).

What was the morality of that time is presented in contemporary sources by authors who describe or criticize the conduct and activity of the members of the particular class taking the lead in contemporary morality. We can read a lot about ancient Greece and its morality in Plato's presentation of Socrates, Peter Abelard (1079–1142) presenting the Middle Ages, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536), Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527), Baldesar Castiglione (1478–1529), but even Slovak authors such as Martin Rakovský (1535–1579) and Juraj Koppay (1550?–1580?) originally presenting very interesting contemporary facts about the renaissance.

## Reflection on morality by Erasmus of Rotterdam and Niccolo Machiavelli

The characteristics of contemporary morality presented by Erasmus of Rotterdam is distinguished mainly by the irony of its particular approaches, but even the overall contemporary moral atmosphere that is evident for instance in his book *The Praise of Folly* (1511), but also in other works, such as dialogue *Julius Excluded from Heaven* and many others which are part of his *Colloquia Familiaria* (1522), but many of these dialogues had been developing from 1500. We can find many similarities between Erasmus' ironic criticism of contemporary morality and Machiavelli's picture of contemporary morality, for instance, in his work *The Prince* (1513). Erasmus' picture of the Pope Julius II (1443–1513) is an example of Machiavelli's politician, or prince. The presented Pope (Julius II) was one of Machiavelli's prototypes when writing his masterpiece. In the personality of the pope we can probably find almost all the attributes that Machiavelli recommended to his prince: stealth, treachery, hypocrisy, craving for power, greed, etc. Pope Julius II convinces Saint Peter in Erasmus' dialogue that he does not deserve a place in heaven, explains to him everything he did for the honor and the glory of the Christian Church, how he increased its property in the way he sold bishoprics for six to seven thousand ducats, regained Bologna for the Holy See, conquered Venice, Ferrara, cursed everybody who criticized

him for his sacred life style, summoned an anti-council to which he invited just his faithful followers to prevent his opponents of accusing him of not fulfilling the promise of calling the council within two years of being elected pope (Erasmus, 1990, pp. 216–238) and helped the Christian church, their wealth and sacred power in many other ways. He did everything to ensure he and the Church were the strongest authorities in this world. In the crucial moment, when we acquire power, we promise everything with no hesitation (Erasmus, 1990, pp. 216–238), said Pope Julius II paraphrasing by Erasmus.

Similarly Erasmus had suggested to the prince that we need to care about people or ruin them: they will get revenge for light offences but they will not seek it for grave ones, therefore if we have to hurt somebody, we have to do it properly not letting them get revenge (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 11). It probably came out of his too pessimistic perception of people and their attributes, because he wrote that people are ungrateful, unreliable, hypocritical, cowardly, greedy, they are simply bad and capable of betrayal if they see any profit for themselves (Machiavelli, 2005, pp. 57–58). Likewise, he stated that “there is no secure means of holding on to cities except by destroying them. Anyone who becomes master of a city accustomed to living in liberty and does not destroy it may expect to be destroyed by it, because such a city always has as a refuge in any rebellion the name of liberty” (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 19). In spite of such cruel advice, many authors, such as Michael White, claim about Machiavelli that his work is primarily a modern political discourse varying from all previous works in the fact that Machiavelli’s objective was to make general rules, instructions that could be used by real people in the real world. He did not strive for theoretical instructions that would have never been anything more than illusions for the world of real people (White, 2007, p. 207). White considers Machiavelli’s *The Prince* as a timeless work, because in his opinion, he describes the world how it is and probably always will be regardless how Christians and other moralists would like it to look (White, 2007, pp. 208–209).

I think we can appreciate Machiavelli’s work *The Prince* because he was able to realistically describe his time, just as he had seen it, with its mistakes and negatives. On the other hand, we can equally reproach him for trying to reform this political reality in the time when he was a member of the diplomatic services and had some real political influence. Even though we can feel some indications that he did not identify himself with the contemporary political reality, he sees an “ideal” of the prince in what he is. He did not provide any vision of what it ought to be. His ideas were based on the political situation in renaissance Italy that did not allow him to think too much about bringing morality and moral virtues into politics, but that hectic time of political chaos turmoil in the corridors of power could be the stimulus for searching for and formulating the vision exceeding his time. On the other hand, we can understand such a pessimistic view of the world as an effort to balance religious faith practically in the character and the virtue of princes who were often presented in the Christian world as “princes from God’s will”, as “anointed by God”, etc.

### **Contemporary morality reflected on by Martin Rakovský and Juraj Koppay**

Martin Rakovský perceived it in such an idyllic way. In his opinion, based on reformation-renaissance humanism, suzerain is a person who rules people in their benefit and has been recalled for this position by lot as god’s instruction or has been elected by people to raise

goodness and rule a common state to horrify unrestrained people, spread truth and honor, punish crimes, force the observation of the laws of the almighty as well as human laws. A suzerain is, according to Rakovský, supposed to protect the peace that is a blessing for the public and to protect virtuous people by force, reward them and stimulate the virtuous by what they deserve. God is the first point of reason for a suzerain. He claimed that a suzerain has to strive to respect faithfulness, shame, peace, piety, wisdom, to value truth and justice the most. In the spirit of reformation humanism, he refused any disbelief in the fact that a suzerain was not created by God who is the source of each act of goodness and is the father of truth and good itself is sourced in it. In his opinion, God is the wellspring and author of virtue (Rakovský, 1974b, pp. 260–263).

Secondly, according to Rakovský, human common sense and human nature are the source of the suzerain. However, he claimed that man is a being that is created for life in a village. God determined the objective that is the good and the borders of that objective for man during his creation, and man is looking for what seems to be good in a way he can to perform it. According to Rakovský, spiritual gifts, art, virtue and sense, as well as dignified morality are a great virtue. Man prepares a blissful life when he acquires this. Who acquires these great goods is delighted and wants to share it with others. Who possesses more virtues, strives to share it with others, their effort is focused on the entire good. The good ones usually let themselves be lead by the good ones, they gather in various groups. Leaders guarantee the security of people and their property. He was convinced that based on this they create more ideal good and glorify God for it (Rakovský, 1974b, pp. 266–267).

According to Rakovský, real fame and glory of princes rest in virtues. In his opinion, true love, justice and kindness are such virtues. In virtues, there is divine power, because there is a light related to what God the Father himself has. Man is mostly a heavenly creature, he inclines upwards by his spirit, to God, to the kingdom of stars (Rakovský, 1974b, pp. 302–303). Common sense leads all the other virtues. Based on this, we can distinguish good from evil, useful from harmful from dishonest. The prince selects what is nicer from nice, and what is less harmful from evil, what is more useful from useful. According to Rakovský, the closest virtue to common sense is justice that cares about the interest of a given state more than about private property. He claimed that justice acts out what the law preaches, prayers or tears won't surrender it, there is no family role in it, it rewards those who deserve it and punishes the lazy. Thereafter, the prince, acting in accordance with justice fulfils contracts, promises and performs devotion; he is not harming those who do no harm to him. There is a middle way to justice, however, two more ways are around it. One leads to need and the other to excess. The first is harmed by excessiveness and evil is the downfall of the second. However, both of them do harm. Virtue is in the middle of them (Rakovský, 1974b, pp. 312–315). Daniel Škoviera claims that Rakovský surpasses his predecessors in the Kingdom of Hungary in his system and even in the scope of elaboration on the particular virtues of a prince (Škoviera, 1998, pp. 29–30). Zuzana Kákošová adds that Rakovský models not only an ideal prince but even the ideal of society, its structure and operation (Kákošová, 1998, p. 43).

Unlike Machiavelli and Erasmus' Pope Julius II, Rakovský held the view that the prince has to be a guardian, not a robber. The prince should protect property and support everybody according to the law. He claimed that if crime spreads throughout the country, wounded patience will change into immense wilderness (Rakovský, 1974a, p. 170). Most of the causes of injustice

and riots are bred from inequality, in his opinion, and it is the originator of unhappiness in people. Inequality is present in the inconsistencies and arbitrariness of officials and administrators as well as in the re-distribution of wealth. Rakovský also claimed that God allows harm to be done, however can only perform good on his own. The public, who defy God's commandments, are the reason for all unhappiness. Thirdly, the reason is tyranny by a hard and grim hand unaware of any rights. God is forced to send punishment even when the king is present, as he shows false piety to God (Rakovský, 1974a, pp. 173–175). Thus, we can state that Rakovský, unlike Machiavelli, was not so pessimistic in his view of the world and man, especially the prince, although he had seen his negatives, too. On the other hand, there is a question whether he had seen the personality of prince too idealistically. We can see the contradiction in himself between the ideal message of ancient times, Machiavelli's image of the time and his religious belief enshrined in Lutheranism (Gluchman, 2009, pp. 560–567). However, a different picture of contemporary morality in aristocratic court is presented by Baldesar Castiglione in his work *The Book of the Courtier* (1528). The work is a virtuous guide for aristocrats and formulates the ideal of the virtuous aristocrat, presents the attributes that should be characteristic for courtiers. The author was inspired by his own experience and many inspirational discussions that were led during his stay in the aristocratic court in Italian Urbine. In his opinion a courtier has to be “an honest and upright man; for in this are included prudence, goodness, strength and temperance of mind, and all the other qualities that are proper to a name so honoured” (Castiglione, 2003, p. 55). He continued to calculate the requirements for being a courtier who should “... to be cautious in his every action, and always to mingle good sense with what he says or does. And let him not only take care that his separate parts and qualities are excellent, but let him order the tenour of his life in such fashion, that the whole may be in keeping with these parts and be seen to be always and in everything accordant with his own self and form one single body of all these good qualities; so that his every act may be the result and compound of all his faculties...” (Castiglione, 2003, p. 80).

Martin Rakovský and Juraj Koppay presented the contemporary morality of aristocratic courts in the Habsburg monarchy in a slightly different way than Castiglione and his picture of the Italian courtier. For instance, Martin Rakovský stated that now we have many who do not tell the truth, unless they are bribed. They are able to lie because of money; they call willfulness as their right and godlessness as honor (Rakovský, 1974a, p. 161). He warned of the constantly increasing significance of money in the life of contemporary man and society. In his opinion, activity is the mother of virtue and everything that a man does is measured by money. He took the view that if you do not have enough money, you do not have enough strength. Wealth is often considered to be the hands and the wings of virtue (Rakovský, 1974a, p. 163). In his opinion, the greatest unhappiness for states and people comes from because people being too ambitious, they are extremely hungry for profit, there is inequality, violence, pride, egoism, sordid thoughts and fear (Rakovský, 1974a, p. 169). We can see a certain similarity with Machiavelli's criticism of and pessimism in such a view of contemporary man, but unlike Machiavelli, it was not general pessimism in the case of Rakovský, but rather just partial, related to the conduct of the aristocracy, or courtiers.

A much stronger critic of contemporary court morality was Juraj Koppay who states in his work *Vita aulica* (1580) in a similar vein as Castiglione that the noble court is the father and

inmate of the good. According to Koppay, firstly, man acts humbly and straight at court, but when he tastes the offered meals, he walks proudly with all the money he possesses, and is able to do everything and does not remember his past life (Koppay, 1980, p. 191). Unlike Castiglione, he holds the view that there are perverse courts in most cases where vices dominate, fraud is a virtue; deceit is divine. In his opinion, such a life is the enemy of good. The highest godlessness rules noble courts because each member is godless and they despise those who have a pure heart, clean hands and pure words. Koppay held the view that courts mainly keep and spoil the blunt and the perverse people who possess hideous hearts, eyes, hands and speech (Koppay, 1980, pp. 161–163). We cannot see any virtue, piety, faith, nobility, honesty or devotion there. Fraud, deceit and pride reign there (Koppay, 1980, pp. 175–179).

No crime can hide, according to Koppay, therefore he came to the conclusion that divine anger comes slowly, but certainly comes and with an even tougher effect, because the greatest prince won't let crime happen without punishment and he refuses mercy for the unjust. In his opinion, the court is empty and shallow. A predatory tyranny does not respect the law, disparages divine commands just for godless deeds. Courtiers sharpen their minds with wine and release their swollen guts and loosen their belts in readiness of future feasts. In his opinion, the one who fought off Trojan troops, Hector and defeated the lion-hearted Achilles, as a wine-lover who can empty a full glass of wine in one sip, won't get praise at court. According to Koppay, God is a delight for such greedy guts, pride is their piety, jealousy is their prayer, deception is their faith, tyrannous reign is their divine wisdom, bird catching is a religion, pubs are churches and false cards are Holy Scripture for them (Koppay, 1980, pp. 197–199).

He formulated eschatological prophecies that all spoiled courtiers are heading towards a cruel death; they will get life for their good deeds and hell for their crimes. In his opinion, honesty is expelled far away from home, religion is in a deep sleep and without any honor. He claimed that the world has been divided by various delusions and until the world collapses and starts its cycle again, until then heaven will look at this world where disagreements constantly arise (Koppay, 1980, pp. 201–203). According to Kákošová, Koppay reflects on life in aristocratic courts where nothing is idealized and its face is revealed too mercilessly. In her opinion, this honest effort is sourced in Koppay's belief that contemporary world is heading towards moral damnation, where, in actual fact, it already is (Kákošová, 1998, p. 44). However, Peter Burke claims that the court has been often drawn as a place where jealousy, defamation, lip service and all types of scams reign, which refers to the way renaissance courtiers have been perceived by other people. However, he claims that there is no need to take this criticism literally. In his opinion, there is jealousy on the part of less successful people shown towards those who were luckier (Burke, 1997, p. 120).

I think that the explanation of the criticism of the way of life at court and of courtiers rests partially in it, but I rather incline towards the fact that Koppay's above-mentioned pessimistic and eschatological conclusions have to be understood in the context of the time he lived in and the great social, religious, political, economic turmoil that happened in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was the century of reformation, religious controversies, conflicts and wars, threat to Europe posed by Turkey, great overseas discoveries, economic exploitation of newly discovered countries, etc. Everything has been followed by ideological, worldview and spiritual turmoil that disrupted

typical contemporary morality and aristocracy, or courtiers were too often the subject of jealousy, criticism and hate. Within contemporary sources, it seems that it was often legitimate.

### **Conclusion**

Apparently, the past was not much better than present. Hence, we can conclude with the thoughts of William Makepeace Thackeray who expressed the core of the life cycle and human history, including moral life all too eloquently when he wrote: “All types of all characters march through all fables: cowards and boasters; victims and bullies; dupes and knaves; long-eared Neddies, giving themselves leonine airs; Tartuffes wearing virtuous clothing; lovers and their trials, their blindness, their folly and constancy. With the very first page of the human story do not love and lies too begin? So the tales were told ages before Aesop; and asses under lions' manes roared in Hebrew; and sly foxes flattered in Etruscan fables; and wolves in sheep's clothing gnashed their teeth in Sanskrit, no doubt. The sun shines to-day as he did when he first began shining; and the birds in the tree overhead, while I am writing, sing very much the same note they have sung ever since there were finches. Nay, since last he besought good-natured friends to listen once a month to his talking, a friend of the writer has seen the New World, and found the (featherless) birds there exceedingly like their brethren of Europe. There may be nothing new under and including the sun; but it looks fresh every morning, and we rise with it to toil, hope, scheme, laugh, struggle, love, suffer, until the night comes and quiet. And then will wake Morrow and the eyes that look on it; and so *da capo*” (Thackeray, 2004, p. 11).

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**Vasil Gluchman** is Professor of Philosophy and Ethics at the Institute of Ethics and Bioethics, University of Prešov (Slovakia). He is an author of *Profesijná etika ako etika práce a etika vzťahov* [Professional Ethics as Work Ethic and Ethics of Relationships], Prešov: FF PU 2014; *Etika a reflexia morálky* [Ethics and Reflection of Morality], Prešov: FF PU 2008; *Human Being and Morality in Ethics of Social Consequences*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen 2003; *Slovak Lutheran Social Ethics*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen 1997; editor of *Ethical Thinking on Past & Present (ETPP 2013)*, Prešov: VPU 2014; *Morality: Reasoning on Different Approaches*, Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi 2013, and *Morality of the Past from the Present Perspective: Picture of Morality in Slovakia in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2007.

### **Corresponding author:**

**Vasil Gluchman**, Institute of Ethics and Bioethics, University of Prešov, 17. novembra 1, SK-08078 Prešov (Slovakia)  
email: vasil.gluchman@unipo.sk

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