



LOUIS XIV: The Craft of Kingship



(Adapted from sources located at <http://splendorsversailles.org/TeachersGuide/VoicesOfVersailles>)

Reflections on the Role of King

Kings are often required to do the opposite of what they would like to do, and this is harmful to their natural desire to do good. They would like to make people happy, but they must instead punish and ruin people they actually like. The interests of the State must come first. The king has to suppress his own wishes so that he doesn't later regret that his desires and the interests of others prevented him from acting for the greatness, the welfare, and the power of the State.

It is not always easy to decide what is best to do in a situation because some are complicated. As long as it's not clear what is best to do, not acting is best; but once the best way to act is understood, action must be taken; that is what has made me successful. When I have made mistakes (which have caused me many problems), they have been caused by kindness and by listening carelessly to the advice of others.

Nothing is as dangerous as weakness, of any kind. To command others, the king must raise himself above them. After hearing all sides of a problem, the king must have an open mind before making a decision, always being sure not to do anything unworthy of the throne, the king's character, or the greatness of the State.

Instructions to Phillip V of Spain from Louis XIV

Never fail to uphold your duties, especially toward God.

Preserve yourself in the quality of your upbringing...

Always be on the side of virtue and against vice.

Do not be so attached to a person that you fail in your duties as king.

Make your subjects happy; to do so, only go to war when you must and when you have considered all the reasons and have discussed it with your Council.

Love the Spaniards and all your subjects attached to your lands and to yourself; don't show favoritism toward those who flatter you most. Respect those who contradict or oppose you if they have good reasons; these are your real friends.

Work to keep your finances in good shape; watch over the colonies in the Americas and your navy; keep the nation's trade in mind; remain united to France, because the alliance between the two nations is stronger than anything that works against it. If you must go to war, lead your armies yourself.

I will end with the most important pieces of advice that I can give you: never allow yourself to be ruled; be the master; have no favorites or prime minister; listen to, and consult your Council, but make decisions yourself. God, who made you King, will give you the rights which are necessary to you, as long as you have the proper goals.

Memories for the Instruction of the Dauphin (Prince of France)

[During the early part of my reign,] the courts of justice seemed to me to be the most difficult to reform. Many things contributed to this: offices were filled by luck and by money rather than by choice and by worth; the lack of experienced and educated judges; the laws made by the kings who came before me were ignored or bypassed almost everywhere; and the trickery and dishonesty of lawyers. Even my council, instead of controlling the courts, caused confusion through an incredible number of conflicting decisions all given in my name, which only made the disorder in the justice system even more shameful.

The evil effects of such disorder fell primarily upon the lower classes, who were already burdened with taxes and poverty in many areas and distressed in others by their own unemployment, and needing help and employment.

Among so many problems, some of which seemed almost unsolvable, three factors gave me encouragement.

The first is that, since kings are men and they must deal with men, they cannot possibly be perfect; . . . however, this is not a reason to avoid doing one's best or to not keep striving to do better, in order to achieve one's goals as well as earn glory.

The second is that in all just and legal efforts, time itself, then action, as well as God's help usually reveal approaches and solutions to the problem.

The last is that Heaven itself seems to be promising me help through inspiration and intervention.

In order to give myself more authority, I decided to examine all details of a program or problem with the department minister I chose (even when such details are usually below the interests and dignity of the king). I did so when the minister would least expect it, so that he would understand that I expected him to be prepared at any time, and on any subject. Learning about such details gradually and over time, rather than in a single attempt, allows a king to collect knowledge easily about many areas that are helpful in making general decisions...

Finally, just as we belong to our people, our people belong to us. No wise man would take revenge and hurt himself by ruining his people just because he had been served poorly; instead, he would make sure that would be served a little better in the future.

Thus, my son, a good king is never angry at his subjects but considers their mistakes in the light of justice and of wisdom. The rise of the *parlements* [courts/legislatures] in general had been dangerous to the kingdom during my youth. They had to be humbled because of what they might do in the future. So as long as they were opposed to my authority, it didn't matter what their intentions were (even if good); when they asserted their own authority, it was bad for the State and harmed all my greatest and most useful programs. If necessary to restore the natural and true order, I would have denied the *parlements* of their powers, in the same way that a painter would remove a beautiful and striking feature from a work if he found it to be too big and out of proportion with the rest of the work. . . .

... For our subjects, my son, are our true riches and the only ones that we protect purely for themselves. All other riches are good for nothing unless we know the art of using them—that is, of spending them wisely. And if God gives me the grace to carry out everything that I have planned, I shall try to bring the prosperity of my reign so that there will be no more extreme poverty or begging in the kingdom. I cannot say that there will not be rich or poor, because luck, labor, and intelligence will always work to keep men in these classes.

... It must be agreed that as bad as a prince may be, the revolt of his subjects is always criminal. God, who has given kings to men, has wanted them to be respected as His representatives. God alone has the right to examine the conduct of kings. God's will is that whoever is born a subject must obey the ruler without exception. This law, so clear and universal, is not designed to help princes alone, but also to help the very people on whom it is imposed. If the people violate this law, they open themselves to much more serious evils than those they claim to be working against. No law is more established by Christianity...

But it is not fair if the kings who support this holy doctrine live an unholy and undisciplined life while expecting their subjects to obey the laws of God. They must be examples of the life their religion expects them to lead and understand that their subjects will not respect them as king or as representative of God if they conduct their lives with evil and violence.

According to Louis XIV, what is the relationship between the king's desires or self-interest and the needs of the state?

What is the relationship between religion and the king's roles and responsibilities?

What problems in France did Louis try to solve? How did he go about solving them?

In what ways did Louis XIV secure and centralize his power in France?

How did Louis see the relationship between the king and his subjects? What are the king's duties to his people? What are the people's obligations to their monarch?

Based on the textbook's description of Louis XIV and his reign, did Louis appear to follow his own advice?
