

Machiavellian Morality in Modern Western Political Ethics

Ahmed Muhammad

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Dr. Katherine Biela

Abstract

This essay considers the question, “To what extent can the Machiavellian morality be argued effective in the realm of western political ethics?” This essay will start by giving context to what a Machiavellian society’s morality encompasses and how it came to be. While considering other perspectives, Machiavelli’s philosophy is sometimes considered a satire by analysts because of its extremity. The idea isn’t too far off to dismiss, but this essay will not consider this perspective to keep the essay concise and coherent and will not be discussed. This essay will demonstrate that the moral principles outlined in Machiavellianism parallel with Mohist Consequentialism. Next, it will provide a comparison to an opposite moral philosophy, Idealism, contrasting the different intentions and different results of both philosophies. Then, Idealistic principles will be contrasted with quotes from *The Prince* to strengthen the central argument. Then, the purpose of Machiavellianism in the political arena will be explained. Thus, the nature of humans, the theatrical nature of politics, and power’s effects on humans will be explored. To support the central reasoning, this essay will continue to use quotes from *The Prince*, but also employ the history of Greek politics to portray the theater in politics. To define and contrast appearance and reality in politics, this essay will explain Hannah Arendt’s insight into reality and Plato’s Allegory of the cave. Then, the etymology of the word “hypocrite” will be connected with the acting involved in being a politician, all while continuously emphasizing the reasoning for Machiavellian ethics. This essay will extend itself by showing the significance of the research by applying Machiavellianism in contemporary times, connecting the work of Jean Baudrillard and the effects of media on politics, and conclude that Machiavellianism holds validity as long as morals are the endgame.

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Introduction

When many wish to describe corrupt, power thirsty politicians, the first word they may use to describe them would be “Machiavellian”. Modern psychologists classify Machiavellianism along with narcissism and psychopathy under a subject called, “The Dark Triad.” Nevertheless, Machiavellianism is still on every curriculum in collegiate level political science classes, many philosophy classes that encompass ethical morality, and even within leadership and entrepreneurship classes. Machiavelli’s work is scrutinized to such great extremes because of mainstream ethical conventions that fundamentally oppose the bases of his ideologies. Therefore, to understand the argument, one must understand mainstream ethical conventions contrasted with the ethical manifestations derived from Machiavelli’s work *The Prince*. Then, one must understand the fundamental nature of politics to accurately answer the question “To what extent can the Machiavellian morality be argued effective in the realm of western political ethics?”

Machiavellianism is described as “the employment of cunning and duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct.”¹ At face value, it does not appeal to any sense of morality whatsoever. Putting some context into Machiavelli’s life aids in understanding the message behind his seemingly immoral philosophy. Machiavelli was born into 1469 Italy, when religious ideals dominated how society operated. Although the contemporary rise of Humanism—well underway by 1469—runs to counter this point, Machiavelli’s narration in *The Prince* clearly conveys that there was no shortage of corruption behind staged goodness in the name of religion. People were

¹ “Machiavellianism.” Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford, England: Oxford UP, 2002. N. Print.

held accountable by the law of religion, and the government combined with the church exemplified perfection and radiating idealism. However, Machiavellianism stood to shatter much of what society perceived from the government. The idea that a government official could be corrupt enough to commit treason would result in an outrage, with the official sometimes exiled or even executed. This is because humans are prideful and idealistic by nature, and accepting these imperfections at fundamental structure was impossible, especially at a time when religious ideals such as Christianity dominated how societies appeared to operate. To the common man, the ruler of a hierarchal government was the symbol of perfection, morality, justice, and truth. Machiavelli's book *The Prince* was considered to be so radical because it rejected this ideal. Having witnessed the brutal nature of politics from watching his father's actions in effort to gain power, Machiavelli had a deep understanding of the extents a man will go to for his personal agenda. Furthermore, he suffered brutality when he was tortured by the government. Both these factors heavily weighed into influencing the moral aspects of Machiavellianism and must have reflected on Machiavelli's own moral compass.

Body

Morality and Machiavellianism

Morality in a Machiavellian society seems to many as unorthodox at best and unreservedly unscrupulous at worst. However, Machiavellianism never rejects morality as a whole; rather, it communicates concern for a leader ruling in the best interest of moral values instead of the best interest of the people. A Machiavellian society is versatile in ethical aspects for the interest of the people. A Machiavellian leader must be driven to do what is necessary for the people, keeping in mind that "Where the willingness is great, the difficulties cannot be

great.”² A Machiavellian leader must always understand the responsibilities he or she bears, and the grimness that may come with them. Nothing should come in the way if the ends must be met. Such ethical principles closely parallel with Mohist Consequentialism, or state consequentialism, which is “an ethical theory which evaluates the moral worth of an action based on how it contributes to the basic goods of a state, through social order, material wealth, and population growth.”³ This type of evaluation often becomes imperative because of the iniquitous nature of reality.

Of the most prominent opposing views to Mohist Consequentialism, the work of Roman political philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero serves as a good example to what Machiavellianism seeks to avoid. Cicero’s work contributed to Idealistic ethics, which evaluate morality based off of the priority of ideals, principles, and values over anything else. Most religions are morally idealistic. Idealism rejects all evil as bad, and does not tend to fluctuate in its moral principles. Idealist moral philosophies seek order in perfection, and conclude that the only way to get as close as possible to perfection is to constantly make the morally correct decisions. Such a system created societies with rigid and extremely straight-forward mindsets of right and wrong. In extreme cases, ideals such as telling the complete truth would be considered the right decision even if it were to be the cause of death and destruction everywhere. Machiavellianism rejects this ideology as it accepts evil as a part of human nature and builds its moral principles attempting to encompass reality rather than building up to an ideal. Every action should be calculated to avoid turmoil, and in extreme cases the better of two evils is the morally correct decision. Rather than

² Machiavelli, Niccolò, W. K. Marriott, Nelle Fuller, and Thomas Hobbes. *The Prince*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1955. Pg. 42. Print.

³ Ivanhoe, P.J.; Van Norden, Bryan William (2005). *Readings in classical Chinese philosophy*. Pg. 60. Hackett Publishing

having an obsession with ideology, Machiavellianism represents a shift to an obsession with reality, its interpretations, and what to make of it. Interestingly, Machiavellianism portrays ideas that become embedded in literature hundreds of years later by The Lost Generation. For the purpose of making their writing authentic, the Lost Generation writers tended to deviate from previous literary conventions and incorporated the imperfections left out by idealists. For example, Ernest Hemingway was the author of one of the most prominent Lost Generation books: *The Sun Also Rises*. Although many praised the authenticity that came to be from his unique writing style, many criticized his work because it was nothing like the previous styles in literature. For example, Hemingway responds to a letter of criticism from his own mother, who conveyed disappointment about his use of the words “damn” and “bitch”. Hemingway responded, “I’m trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing. You can’t do this without putting in the bad and the ugly as well as what is beautiful. Because if it is all beautiful you can’t believe in it. Things aren’t that way.”⁴ To incorporate the beautiful as well the ugly is for the purpose of dealing with reality rather than a fictional ideal. Machiavellianism isn’t concerned with building principles based off an ideal or depict what things ought to be, as much as it is concerned for political theoretical principles to be built off of the reality of politics. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli doesn’t reject evils such as corruption or hypocrisy, rather he embraces them, incorporates them as reality, and acknowledges that leaders must learn to be evil to counter it. He counters Cicero’s philosophies because Cicero simply rejects the realities of human nature rather than addressing them. In Machiavellianism, constructing morals and ethical values that are based off ideals is

⁴ Hemingway, Ernest. Letter to Dr. C. E. Hemingway. 20 Mar. 1925. MS. France, Paris.

pointless because there is no ideal world. Machiavelli's realistic approach is what gives his work an essence of timelessness. Cicero and any other idealists had a fleeting nature to their work, because societies and their ideas change, and when they fade away, so do their philosophies. It is crucial to investigate Machiavellianism because it focuses on human nature, which doesn't change easily. Human beings aren't known to be different from each other at a fundamental level. Humans are prone to anger, jealousy, sadness, happiness, lust, regret, and ambition. Being in the field of politics accentuates some human characteristics such as the greed for power, while diminishing others tendencies such as empathy or the adherence to morality. The discussion of the morality of Machiavellianism is momentous because in modern politics, Machiavellianism still holds its roots. Therefore, a Machiavellian society isn't by definition immoral, it simply takes a different path than what many like to consider themselves to be.

Purpose of Machiavellianism

Having been raised in the political arena, Machiavelli saw many men in power. Some of them were, as a matter of fact, as righteous as can be, striving and failing to reach moral perfection. First of all, Machiavelli noticed the frustration this effort caused. Machiavelli believed that perfection was and forever would be impossible to achieve in every aspect of a political career. Although they understood this concept, Idealists still strived towards perfection to get as close to it as they possibly could. Many believed this struggle to be noble and brave, but Machiavelli saw no use in such heroism, especially because he saw many such heroes fall to their ruin. He states, "Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence a prince who wants to keep his authority must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires."⁵

⁵ Machiavelli, Niccolò, W. K. Marriott, Nelle Fuller, and Thomas Hobbes. *The Prince*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1955. Pg. 32. Print.

Machiavelli argues that success with such stubborn nobility has become impossible due to the abundant and clever nature of evil. He describes “learning how not to be good” as knowledge, and, as many have said, knowledge is power. If one truly seeks to be a successful leader, he or she must know how to wield and combat evil. He further explains, “Wisdom consists of knowing how to distinguish the nature of trouble, and in choosing the lesser evil.”⁶ His interesting choice of the words “lesser evil” implies a situation where pure goodness isn’t an option. Such is the political arena, where oblivious goodness is persistently crushed under the relentless fist of cunning. Thus, goodness could be detrimental to the people or even to one’s self. Building off of this conjecture, if a leader must compromise on his moral beliefs to keep power away from the hands of a bad leader, or to retain their own, they should do so. In Machiavellianism, the greater good always accounts for the stability of the state. It isn’t that a Machiavellian leader will do whatever it takes to stay in power, because, unlike other men solely seeking power, a Machiavellian leader’s endgame must remain to be for the greater good of the people. Thus, compromising on morality for a greater good exemplifies its own unique nobility. At the same time, Machiavellianism does not advocate freedom from all moral values. Machiavelli directly suggests that there should be a limit to one’s compromises when he says “or refrain from using it [the knowledge of how to not be good], as necessity requires.”⁷ This necessity is not only when being good is required, but also when it becomes ethically necessary. There come times where a Machiavellian leader will draw moral boundaries to retain their own humanity and never cross them. By paving a path in the middle of two extremes, a Machiavellian leader liberates himself from enslavement of both morality and evil to more efficaciously pursue the best possible

⁶ Machiavelli, Niccolò, W. K. Marriott, Nelle Fuller, and Thomas Hobbes. *The Prince*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1955. Pg. 32. Print.

⁷ Machiavelli, Niccolò, W. K. Marriott, Nelle Fuller, and Thomas Hobbes. *The Prince*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1955. Pg. 24. Print.

outcome. In retrospect Machiavelli's goals weren't to undermine morality, but to create a basis for righteous leaders increase their chances to work towards a greater good without being toppled by corruption.

Reality and Appearances in Politics

The political arena has grown to be known as a grotesque field where power becomes the agenda of every man or woman involved. This is true because of the nature of politics and, by extension, the nature of human beings. One of the first structure of politics was incorporated in the ancient Greek poleis, or the ancient city-states made up of a group of citizens. In the polis, there were political assemblies called agoras, where citizens spoke to the group discussing various political issues that arose. In the agora, the audience saw the speaker for what he portrayed himself as, and his arguments would be evaluated based upon only his words, rhetoric, and actions presented in front of the agora. Therefore, one's political persona became one's true appearance to the audience, similar to an actor's role in theatre. In essence, the appearance of a speaker became the reality of who he was. German philosopher Hannah Arendt insightfully portrays this idea of appearances versus reality when she says, "everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality."⁸ Machiavelli also proves to be aware of this concept when he says, "Men in general judge more by the sense of sight than by the sense of touch, because everyone can see but few can test by feeling. Everyone sees what you seem to be, few know what you really are; and those few do not dare take a stand against the general opinion."⁹ Machiavelli isn't talking about physical sense of

⁸ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1958. Pg. 50. Print.

⁹ Machiavelli, Niccolò, W. K. Marriott, Nelle Fuller, and Thomas Hobbes. *The Prince*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1955. Pg. 29. Print.

touch as much as he is alluding to the idea of having a sense for how people are. As mentioned before, humans are righteous, honest, and sincere at times, but also have the ability to be devious, deceitful, and hypocritical given incentive. Machiavelli says that men often forget that a politician has both these sides when they are presented with a persona the politician has taken on, because of the fact that when men are presented with anything, they tend to trust sight more than this idea. In general, humans trust what they see, because one of the main ways humans construct reality is through sight. Machiavellianism requires one to be well aware of the duality of perception, at times to recognize it in other men while during other times to exploit it for their own advantage. In modern politics, this concept continues to exist in many ways, whether it be behavior in debates, press conferences, public personas, speeches with words strategically chosen by hired writers, or appearances crafted by fashion experts. A politician's life is meticulously constructed for a better public image, which is then received as reality by the people. When this happens, lies put on become truth to the general public, as if politics is merely theater and politicians are actors.

Appearances distorting reality was a concept prevalent long before Machiavelli and Arendt. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Socrates presents a scenario in which a group of boys have been chained in a cave while facing towards the wall and unable to look behind them. As the days progressed, the only thing they ever saw were the shadows cast by people and horses passing by and the only thing they heard were the echoes that escaped inside the cave. To the boys, the shadows were the only real objects and the echoes came from the shadows. Having no knowledge of what lies behind him, one boy is released to go outside. Initially, he turns to walk out, but once he sees the light, he runs back. Plato suggests that "...it would hurt his eyes, and he would escape by turning away to the things which he was able to look at, and these he would

believe to be clearer than what was being shown to him.”¹⁰ At the hint of shattering reality, humans first respond with denial. However, Plato goes on to suggest “suppose...that someone should drag him...by force, up the rough ascent, the steep way up, and never stops until he could drag him out into the light of the sun.”¹¹ After he gradually adjusted to the outside world, he went back to his companions, blind in the darkness because of his adjusted eyesight, telling them there was more to the world than shadows and echoes. Socrates goes as far to suggest that if they could, the prisoners would kill anyone who attempted to shatter their perception of reality. Such remains true in Machiavellianism. The general public of the time was fed with so many false appearances for so long that the introduction of Machiavellianist principles had a similar effect with that of the prisoners being told their shadows were mere castings of reality. Therefore, the reality of politics may have just been a concept that people in the 1500’s were not ready for. But has the public perception of reality still lag in the past, or have our politicians just further sophisticated their hypocrisy?

Power and Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is defined as “a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess, especially a person whose actions belie stated beliefs” or more indicatively, “a person who puts on false appearances.”¹²

The word hypocrite comes from the ancient Greek word “ὑποκριτής” (hypokritēs) which literally meant “actor”. The theatrical nature of politics requires every politician to be an actor.

Machiavellianism recognizes this close parallel, which is why it gives one so much flexibility in morality. The nature of aesthetics in politics makes it impossible to root out evil from all

¹⁰ Plato, and W. H. D. Rouse. N.p.: Penguin Group, 2003. Pg. 364. Print.

¹¹ Plato, and W. H. D. Rouse. N.p.: Penguin Group, 2003. Pg. 365. Print.

¹² Allee, John Gage. Webster's Dictionary. New York: Galahad, 1975. Print.

governmental institutions. Because all appear to be good, there is no way to determine who is acting and who is genuinely righteous. In addition to this, the delicate world of politics also demands diplomacy, which means that rigorous manners to determine genuine righteousness are not usually taken. Therefore, a Machiavellian leader must assume that no one is righteous, and furthermore be incredibly careful who they trust. Additionally, as stated before, the abundance of people wielding power who don't adhere to any sort of morality creates a system where upright idealists are eliminated. Machiavellianism understands that the solution to this problem lies in a leader's ability to act along with everyone else, and do whatever is necessary to fight evil while maintaining a morally acceptable appearance. Thus, a leader must be hypocritical in the sense that he must appear ideal to the public, but compromise on his morality when necessary. In other words, a Machiavellian leader must be keen to overcome evil with a lesser evil. To portray this idea, Machiavelli writes, "The lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves."¹³ Machiavelli draws an animalistic scene comparing politics to animals in pernicious situations, where only cleverness and cunning are what keep them alive. These animals survive by exploiting each other's weaknesses. As dramatic as it may seem, such is what Machiavelli compares to the realm of politics. Men in power are animalistic in the aspect that they are ruthless and exploit each other's weaknesses as a means of survival. This primitive behavior correlates to the hunger men feel for power, and the extent to which they will go on order to satisfy that hunger. Power has corrupted so many in a system hypocritical by nature that seeking to live a moral political career will only lead to one being devoured by evil. Therefore, a

¹³ Machiavelli, Niccolò, W. K. Marriott, Nelle Fuller, and Thomas Hobbes. *The Prince*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1955. Pg. 24. Print.

Machiavellian leader must recognize traps and scare wolves better than anyone else to survive and outsmart others.

Application on Modern Politics

In the Information Age, knowledge, news, and ideas are readily available to anyone who can get their hands on technology. People are connected instantly in a way never imagined before. Therefore, the media became a huge method for people to stay informed on politics. Political theories such as Machiavellianism, combined with Karl Marx's Theory of Ideology, Plato's Allegory of the Cave, and numerous government scandals such as the Watergate Scandal, or the Lewinsky Scandal, led many people to become skeptical of government. Because of its scandalous nature, skepticism spread like wildfire, and such expansion of the realm of politics only increased the need for politicians to perfect their acting. One might suggest to use new technology and the closer spectacle on politics to simply strip away lies and hypocrisy, but French philosopher Jean Baudrillard argues that doing so is impossible. Baudrillard suggests that because of the closer spectacle the media puts on politics, one lie covering the truth is never the case anymore. Lies cover lies that beget other lies until it becomes impossible to strip away the facade and find the truth. This idea is so important because the government is often portrayed as a system in which good will triumph over evil. Even if the system is broken, there are mechanisms in place that enable goodness to prevail. The Amendments to the Constitution, the limited time a congressman or senator can hold office, and the Power of the Purse being granted the House of Representatives are all examples of ways the government ensures justice and morality. As mentioned before, Baudrillard rejects this narrative. He states that "where we think that

information produces meaning, the opposite occurs. Information devours its own content.”¹⁴

This quote comes from the section of his book in which he explores the modern relationship between the media and the government. Often, politicians leak certain information at certain times for their own personal agendas. When the people think they know something, it is often what someone, somewhere in the system wants them to think. This is precisely why Machiavellianism allows a leader to lie. In this mayhem of lies, the truth would never be able to do the wonders of a lie. When a politician uses deception, he has more control over a situation rather than if he just told the truth. A Machiavellian leader must again be the best of deceivers, and the keenest of observers to stay above the facade and guide the state in the best way possible.

Conclusion

Machiavellianism provides the means to triumph over true evil as it stands in politics. In a moral aspect, Machiavellianism takes a controversial stand because it actually advocates for the use of deception, hypocrisy, and fear to achieve certain goals. However, Machiavellianism always tells adherents to pick the lesser evil in a situation, and always understand their limits. In the gruesome political arena, Machiavellianism holds its unique morality as it triumphs over the evil hidden behind the aesthetical nature of politics. Although it goes against what many hold to be true, Machiavellianism isn't the evil, narcissistic set of ideals it has often been portrayed as because of the public's disillusionment to reality; rather, it holds nobility because of its consequentialist ideals that always holds one accountable to an honorable endgame. Thus, in response to the question, “To what extent can the Machiavellian

¹⁴ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1994. Pg. 80. Print.

morality be argued effective in the realm of western political ethics?", one must deeply consider the theatrical nature of politics, and the nature of morality in politics, and the purpose of Machiavellianism before reaching a conjecture. Perhaps in a perfect world where men in power are void of any sort of evil could Machiavellianism be argued as outright immoral.

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