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Introduction to Philosophy, Section 03

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An answer to topic 1:

Yin and yang, Push and Pull, Do and Understand

The debate between Niccolo Machiavelli’s harsh and realistic worldview and Socrates’ idealistic moral worldview presents an interesting dilemma–must politics and personal ethics prioritize what works over what ought to be? Machiavelli, dismissing Socrates’ vision of justice as an “imaginary principality,” urges leaders and individuals alike to embrace the “effectual truth” of power, prudence, and adaptability. Socrates, on the other hand, insists that politics and life are inseparable from the pursuit of virtue, arguing that justice and moderation form the basic building blocks of a stable society and each individual’s soul. At a glance, these ideals seem completely opposite of each other, as they offer insights on how to properly run a society and one's own life, but tell you to do it in separate ways. However, in politics, unrealistic idealism risks naivety, while harsh realism risks tyranny; And in life, pure virtue ignores the imperfections of humans, and pure pragmatism ignores the true purpose of ethics. What is also interesting, however, is that while Machiavelli does often strictly oppose the Socratic way of thinking, he rarely contradicts it. When fusing the practicality of Machiavelli’s worldview with Socrates’ commitment to moral principles, you can make an approach that balances idealism with efficiency–one that allows society to thrive without abandoning ethical ideals and allows individuals to act without losing sight of their humanity, or similarly–The Good.

Machiavelli’s insistence on the “effectual truth” is often read as a rejection of ideals, but it might be closer to a Socratic irony in disguise. The effectual truth isn’t about the abandoning of morals, it is about embracing the messy reality of politics and society. Machiavelli isn’t saying "be evil," but rather "understand that life is messy, and sometimes you have to make hard choices." Socrates’ imaginary republic–a city governed by philosopher-kings–in my opinion, is less a blueprint than an allegory to make us see the gap between human’s imperfections and ideal justice. To show us how close we actually are. Machiavelli, too, shows us this gap–his “prudence” is not amorality but a recognition that politics inhabits a sad space where ideals are negotiated–or enforced in his sense–not absolute. Sad because leaders often face no perfect choices, where his “prudence” is the ability to assess these dilemma’s clearly with a realistic mindset. What is important here is the definition of dialectic, as Socrates defines it as the highest level of thinking. It is defined most simply as the debate between ideals. I think good politics balances both–using power effectively while constantly asking, "Is this right?" A good example of this could be how Abraham Lincoln perfectly timed his Emancipation Proclamation speech to weaken the Confederacy during the civil war, which would be a pragmatic action, but did it in the pursuit of justice while he had to work through political limits, as he could not free all slaves immediately. These ideas show methods of both Socratic and Machiavellian thinking. Pure idealism fails because of real world constraints, while pure realism fails because it can justify unethical behavior– in the sense that the ends justify the means. A better method would be to combine the two. Ask Machiavelli’s question, "Will this action work?" and Socrates’ question, "Is this action just?" Politics is like driving a car, in a crude oversimplification. Machiavelli is the steering wheel, navigating the road’s twists. Socrates is the GPS, asking, "Is this the right direction?" You need both to reach your destination without crashing.

For the individual, I think that Socrates’ call to live virtuously seems incompatible at a glance with Machiavelli’s prudence. Yet virtue, when stripped of naivety, is its own kind of prudence. A life of moderation and self-examination is not a retreat from reality but a hidden mastery of it. In terms of power, knowing your strengths/weaknesses helps you adapt to challenges. And in terms of strategy, ethical behavior isn’t naive—it builds trust and resilience, which are practical advantages. I think one should weaponize their self-awareness, that is to say use honesty about human flaws to outsmart others. A person who admits their own biases avoids bad decisions caused by ego. Machiavelli’s virtue–the ability to shape fortune through adaptability–finds an unexpected parallel in Socratic integrity; Both demand an unbiased assessment of one’s environment and the discipline to act accordingly. This could also apply to a real world example as well. You could reflect on your habits, let’s say you procrastinate and you want to stop. You can then use that insight to design a stricter schedule and essentially trick yourself into productivity. This shows that self knowledge is a tool for discipline. This can be most simply defined as the Socratic mindset giving you the clarity to see your own true motives and Machiavelli giving you the tactics to navigate that environment effectively, true to your motives. Additionally, Machiavelli says in chapter 15, that one person can either be proud or humane. This shows that he believes that one who is humble can be good. And according to Socrates, which I have a hard time believing otherwise, that everyone is always acting in attempt to do good. So Machiavelli expands on this, essentially saying that one can only to good if oneself is humble; And Socrates knows that we all want to be good.

When discussing which ideal is better than the other, I think it is important to first note how possible it is for those two ideals to coexist. I think that the Socratic method and Machiavellian method is an example of how even things that seem completely opposite can actually still justly coexist. The core idea to me is that Machiavelli and Socrates aren’t enemies—they’re two sides of the same coin. The true opposition lies not in the philosophers but in our simplification of them. Machiavelli’s “The Prince” is a guide on survival in a broken world; Socrates, in “The Republic,” diagnoses that brokenness. Politics and personal life require balancing their insights to avoid extremes. Politics needs both power and ideals. Politics is messy. Leaders need practical strategies to survive and make things happen, but without ethical reflection, power becomes tyranny. Leaders must ask, “Is this just? Who suffers?” A dictator who ignores ethics might stay in power but causes suffering, which would make the nation weak. A leader who’s only idealistic might fail to defend their nation against a more prudent adversary. In a way, politics is like building a bridge. Machiavelli gives you the tools and materials, Socrates gives you the blueprint. Without tools, the bridge is just an idea. Without a blueprint, it might collapse. To me, the best approach here is to treat politics as the art of finding what is possible, while pushing the boundaries of the ideal. Machiavelli says a leader can’t rely on wishful thinking. They must act strategically, even if it means compromising. Socrates would say that even while navigating the messy "possible," politics must answer to a higher moral standard. Ideals should be kept in the back of your mind, challenging compromises and pushing for better. Personal life needs both integrity and adaptability. To “know thyself” and live virtuously–despite life’s unpredictability. Adaptability, or virtue to Machiavelli, helps you navigate challenges without losing yourself. The individual can be treated as the development of oneself while allowing yourself to adapt and survive your environment. Personal growth requires strict self-examination and commitment to virtues, but rigid virtue can break in the real world. You need flexibility to survive without losing your core values. I think that in this debate, the two sides are not actually rivals. Each reveals the other’s blind spots, and in a way allows for them to be filled. You can see this in Portia when you look at Shakespeare’s “Merchant of Venice.” She seeks justice, but values loyalty over indifference. She reflects Machiavelli by achieving her goals through cunning and masking it as virtue. She uses law in the way Hobbes would argue, and exposes hypocrisy in the light of Socrates. She uses Machiavelli’s prudence as a Socratic irony in politics and Socratic virtue as Machiavellian strategy in personal life, which is coincidentally what my first two paragraphs were arguing were optimal.

Like usual when it comes to philosophy, the answer does not lie in what was said, but rather the gaps of what each has not said. To me, the answer of this question lies not in what answers were provided, but rather in between the gaps of those answers. Because while knowing that Machiavelli doesn’t agree with the Socratic mindset, I also know that he is smart enough to actually strictly oppose the Socratic mindset instead of simply dismissing it. The fact that this book “contains everything that he knows,” while not showing that the Socratic method has no place in the real world, implies that the Socratic method does have its own place. He intentionally would’ve recognized that, but yet he didn’t care to put all of Socrates’ ideas to test–because they have value. Instead, their philosophies form a dialectic—one that cryptically tells us to navigate the world as it is–while striving toward what it ought to be. The true lesson lies not in choosing between Machiavelli and Socrates, but in seeking the answer to their questions–Does this work? and Is this right? These answers in tandem, similarly, are ones that the world needs in order to thrive.