A transcendental analysis of ‘The Prince’

Introduction

It is a commonly held opinion that the precepts of Machiavelli's 'The Prince' are indeed very effective, but unfortunately immoral.[1] When someone utters this conjunction, they are evaluating the book along what they consider two separate and independent dimensions, namely instrumentality and morality. This separation of the two dimensions betrays an assumption of theirs, one that is different from Machiavelli's. In judging instrumental effectiveness, Machiavelli uses empirical observations as appropriate supporting evidence. Here, the common opinion agrees with his method. But in judging whether something ought to be done, conventional morality finds empirical evidence and arguments insufficient. Machiavelli, on the other hand, remains empirical. His moral criterion seems to stop at effectiveness, taking for granted that what is effective also ought to be done.

> "my intention is to write something useful for anyone who understands it, it seemed more suitable for me to search after the effectual truth of the matter rather than its imagined one. Many writers have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen nor known to exist in reality. For there is such a distance between how one lives and how one ought to live, that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation."[2]

He seems to take for granted that what is effective in the physical world is useful, and should be preferred to be done. In other words, rules for what ought to be done are determined from *within the physical world*. Consistent with this ontological prioritization, Machiavelli saw sensory cognition as the fundamental principle in acquiring knowledge. Human beings learn about the primarily physical world *firstly* by perceiving through the senses. Machiavelli's criterion of truth is thus aesthetic.[3] His epistemological first principle being aesthetic, it makes sense that Machiavelli should find the aesthetic perspective the most appropriate mode for moral and political reasoning as well. As clearly seen in the previous quote, he prefers this aesthetic mode of reasoning over purely abstract reasoning that is completely independent of empirical evidence. '[T]he reason that is employed is aesthetic (...) In opposition to a normative political theory that is grounded on claims about the universality of (logical) reason in ascertaining the nature of the world and of man, and subsequently ordering society in such a way as to diminish the dangers of unreasonable behavior, aesthetic political theory begins from the perspectivism of particular experiences.'[4]

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[1] Brenner, 2020
[2] Machiavelli, ch.XV
[3] von Vacano, p. 2. Aesthetic here means "that which is perceived through the senses, or in other words, through sensory cognition (...) beautiful or not."
[4] von Vacano, p. 4-5

Thus, between Machiavellianism and conventional opinions on it, there are presuppositional differences regarding what is considered true and reasonable. With this in mind, let us begin by exploring how the instrumental content of 'The Prince' is derived from its epistemological first principle of aesthetic cognition.

Beyond good and evil

Taking aesthetic cognition as the proper way to acquire knowledge, Machiavelli is empirical in his teachings on human nature. He takes his own perspective and particular experiences to be sufficient evidence to derive 'rules' of human behavior and responses. He seems to find them almost as infallible as scientific laws.[5] Based on his experiences, Machiavelli reaches the conclusion that it is impossible for a man to *both* be entirely 'good' by conventional standards *and* achieve political greatness. Conventional goodness, in Machiavelli's historical context, can be taken as the amalgam of virtues promoted by Christianity, or for example Cicero's precepts of radical honesty and non-violence.[6] Machiavelli objects to such precepts of being completely good for practical reasons. He believes that there are and always will be men who are 'not good'. Thus, '*a man who wishes to profess goodness at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good. Therefore, it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge or not to use it according to necessity.*'[7] So it is impractical to be completely good. But towards what aims?

According to Machiavelli, a prince must have as his primary aims: securing and maintaining himself and his well-being; saving and maintaining the state, preventing the state from being taken away from him.[8] The author's insistence on security implies that he deems it is a desirable thing for a prince to be and remain sovereign of his State, and for his State to remain intact, even at the cost of virtue. Why should Machiavelli think it better for the sovereign and the State to remain intact at the cost of traditional virtues? This isn't an obvious position, since conventional morality would argue the opposite: If the sovereign or the State were not completely good, they are in other words corrupt, and it would be better for both to fall. Which premises lead Machiavelli to his own position rather than the traditional one?

We find the answer scattered across many sections in the Prince, where Machiavelli indeed has a recurrent guiding principle for action: a kind of consequentialism. In chapter VIII, he distinguishes between two types of cruel acts, one necessary and even desirable, the other to be avoided. The desirable kind of cruelty is *'carried out in a single stroke, done out of necessity to protect oneself, and then are not continued but are instead*

[5] "by not following any of the precepts observed by others who seized territories and wished to retain them. Nor is this in any sense a miracle, but very ordinary and to be expected (...) a general rule which rarely, if ever, fails" - Machiavelli, ch.III
[6] Viroli, 2005
[7] Machiavelli, ch.XV
[8] Machiavelli, ch.XV & XVIII

converted into the greatest possible benefits for the subjects'. One must avoid cruelties that, *'although few at the outset, increase with the passing of time instead of disappearing'.* Here, the consequentialist element lies in him quantifying troubles over time and preferring the option that minimizes suffering. Besides the temporal aspect, Machiavelli also considers the number of people impacted by a decision:

> *"With a very few examples of cruelty, he will prove more compassionate than those who, out of excessive mercy, permit disorders to continue from which arise murders and plundering, for these usually injure the entire community, while the executions ordered by the prince injure specific individuals."*[9]

A cruel prince is by far *preferable* to the anarchic chaos that results from a too lenient leader. This preference implies that Machiavelli does not find it morally superior to be conventionally 'good', if one thereby loses and messes up the State. He finds it morally preferable to be a ruler who minimizes suffering and maximizes benefit for one's subjects. And to that end, occasionally it is appropriate to use 'bad' means, his assumption being that it is impossible to be a hundred percent good without severely injuring the state at some point. By consequentialist standards, a prince who follows the precepts in 'the Prince' is far more beneficial to his people than one who does not.

For the most competent and beneficial candidate to become and remain sovereign - this is what the people *actually* want. People might *say* that they want a completely honest and virtuous leader in the traditional sense. But should this virtue lead to bad outcomes for the State and themselves, they would be dissatisfied with the leader and overthrow him. Deep down, people care more about the outcome than goodness.[10] So being consequentialist and prioritizing the outcome is a win-win for all parties. The prince is therefore justified in prioritizing the security of his sovereignty and of his State, if he keeps benefitting his people.

Machiavelli's consequentialism does not mean that traditional virtues have no place in his system, however. Machiavelli encourages traditional virtue, recommending the prince be traditionally virtuous *as much as possible without* compromising security. *'A prince or a ruler must 'not depart from the good', as long as he can; but he 'should know how to enter into evil forced by necessity."*[11] It seems to me that the primary motivation for this incorporation of traditional virtue is to appease the people and prevent them from hating the prince. This interpretation is based on Machiavelli's recommendation that, in situations where security and traditional virtue are mutually exclusive, the Prince must

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[9] Machiavelli, ch.XVII

[10] "ordinary people are always taken in by appearances and by the outcome of an event." - Machiavelli, chp.XVIII

[11] Machiavelli, ch.XVIII

choose security but *pretend* to be virtuous.[12] This is a manifest interest in upholding a certain image.

So far, we have elucidated Machiavelli's prescription to combine consequentialism with traditional virtue strictly from the *instrumental* perspective that it is effective. But this combination could also be prescribed as a *moral* argument, and this aspect will be discussed in section 4 on morality. To summarize this section, the basis for all Machiavelli's precepts is a belief in the omnipresence of bad men. Taking it for granted as a fundamental axiom of the human condition necessarily implies that if a leader is to survive, be effective and beneficial to his people, he must be both 'good' and 'bad'. We thus have the framework for the system of advice that is 'the Prince'. Let us flesh out its concrete implementation.

The virtuous prince

Monopoly on Fear

Throughout 'the Prince', Machiavelli lists out concrete traits he considers inherent in human nature, and explains how a competent Prince must deal with each of them by a corresponding virtue. In this context, Machiavelli uses virtue to mean competence and not conventional goodness. The virtues of a Prince are those traits which allow him to effectively deal with human nature and other life patterns in order to achieve political greatness. To create and maintain a stable rule, a prince must leverage the most fundamental human motivations. The more fundamental they are, the more he can rely on them determining people's behavior and reactions. Machiavelli takes as evident that fear and self-interest are the most fundamental human motivations. Self-interest is leveraged by bribing or rewarding subjects to incur their gratitude. An example of this is the Medici's system of patronage.[13] Fear is leveraged by making the prince powerful enough to threaten anyone's well-being.

It is ideal if the prince can be both feared and loved. But Machiavelli specifies that '*since it is difficult to be both together, it is much safer to be feared than to be loved, when one of the two must be lacking.*'[14] His argument is that for the subjects to 'love' the prince, the interests of both parties must align, which isn't always the case. This means this method isn't always applicable. In addition, though humans are self-interested, they tend to be ungrateful, or at least not grateful for long. So even though self-interest is so fundamental to human nature, leveraging this aspect is unreliable. On the other hand, fear can be maintained whether interests align or not, *and* humans are very reliably

[12] "it is not necessary for a prince to possess all of the above-mentioned qualities, but it is very necessary for him to appear to possess them (...) always observing them is harmful, but appearing to observe them is useful: for instance, to appear merciful, faithful, humane, trustworthy, religious" - Machiavelli, ch.XVIII
[13] Viroli, 2005
[14] Machiavelli, chp. XVII

fearful. This greater applicability and reliability makes fear a more stable and controllable lever than gratitude: '*since men love at their own pleasure and fear at the pleasure of the prince, the wise prince should build his foundation upon that which is his own, not upon that which belongs to others: only he must seek to avoid being hated*'.[15]

Thus, achieving and maintaining constant fear is the most important precept in the book. The prince must be the *greatest threat* to anyone. To succeed at this, he must be the most powerful, by possessing and controlling a loyal army capable of defeating *any* potential enemy at all times. Towards foreign attackers, his principality must have a well-developed army that consists of its *own* subjects— it must not depend on mercenaries or other countries for protection, as these are not loyal. Towards internal foes such as aristocrats, the prince must have an army personally loyal to him. The maintenance of such an army requires the contribution of other virtues such as good financial management and cruelty. But the point is that the prince must never put his army second. To objections that his advice overly emphasizes war relative to governance, Machiavelli would respond that maintaining an adequate military *is also* governing, because a 'compassionately cruel' and feared sovereign is necessary to maintain social order and security.[16] This thought is similar to Hobbes's Leviathan.

Besides prioritizing military investment, the prince must observe the following strategic precepts[17]: He must weaken the powerful, and ally himself with the weak to strengthen himself. He must never make or contribute to another becoming more powerful. Lastly, in weakening or harming another, the prince must injure them to the point of removing all possibility for revenge. Following these precepts maximizes his *relative* power and prevents him from being revenged upon or attacked for posing a threat.

Money

While being feared is a must, Machiavelli believes it is entirely possible and necessary to be feared without being hated.[18] 'And above all things, a prince must guard himself against being despised and hated',[19] since this invites rebellion. To prevent being hated and despised, he must abstain 'from the property of his citizens and subjects, and from their women. If he must spill someone's blood, he should do this when there is proper justification and manifest cause'.[20] In other words, the competent prince is cruel and feared, but *not* unjust. If a ruler is just, the people can count on him keeping his word and being consistent with his self-proclaimed rules. Consequently, there are no random and unpredictable attacks on their lives or property. They might fear him, but do not hate him, because they know that they can keep their lives and property as long as they

[15] Machiavelli, chp. XVII
[16] See previous distinction between two types of cruelties.
[17] Machiavelli, chp. III
[18] Machiavelli, chp. XVII
[19] Machiavelli, chp. XVI
[20] Machiavelli, chp. XVII

abide by his laid-out laws. They have a sense of security autonomy when planning and carrying out their lives.

People are especially sore about their *property*. In this connection, the prince must avoid raising people's taxes. So to properly maintain his army without overtaxing his people, he must be parsimonious.[21] He mustn't spend his own money on non-essentials like parties or gifts, only on the military. In military conquest, he mustn't be more ambitious and greedy than his means realistically allow him. He mustn't try to conquer lands he has no means for, as this would also force him to raise taxes. Furthermore, being parsimonious also prevents him from growing poor and despised, the other thing to avoid.

Fox and Lion

We said that a competent prince must be both good and bad. In his latter capacity, by Machiavelli's analogy, 'a prince must know how to make use of the nature of the beast, he should choose from among the beasts the fox and the lion'.[22] The fox is shrewd and cunning. This is the manner in which the prince must deal with cunning people and their plots and traps. He must be either suspicious or trusting, where appropriate. He must only keep his word when advantageous, but successfully pretend to be honest and traditionally virtuous in general. The lion, on the other hand, is bold and cruel. This is the manner in which the prince must deal with impetuously aggressive and strong people. And he must be cruel towards his army's soldiers to keep them united, disciplined and obedient to him. He needs both abilities to deal with *all types* of possible dangers and foes. The fox cannot deal with simple and straightforward strength, the lion cannot deal with cunning and complicated strategy.

These two capacities also apply to another important analogy in the book: that of the physician. A competent physician can quickly diagnose illnesses in their beginning stages and cure them right away. Prevention is better than cure. If diagnosis comes too late, there is no cure. As a fox, the prince has the discernment and foresight to diagnose problems early. He knows the two best strategies for securing and uniting conquered lands with different languages, customs and traditions: the first is to establish colonies there and the second is for the prince to go to live in the newly conquered lands.[23] After quickly diagnosing the illness, he must administer the remedy. The prince must engage in conflict as soon as it is necessary, and this requires the courage and proactiveness of the lion. Like the progression of an illness without treatment, a conflict is only magnified if it is deferred: '*one should never allow disorder to persist in order to avoid going to war, because one does not avoid a war but, instead, defers it to your disadvantage.*'[24]

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[21] Machiavelli, chp. XVI
[22] Machiavelli, chp. XVIII
[23] Machiavelli, chp. III
[24] Machiavelli, chp. III

Machiavellian morality

Some interpretations argue that Machiavelli himself wasn't immoral, since he did not write 'The Prince' to encourage people to follow its precepts, but merely to expose the political reality, in a manner scientific and descriptive, rather than normative. We won't go into that question here. Instead, we suppose the precepts of 'The Prince' to be normative rather than descriptive, in order to compare them with the normative precepts of conventional morality. We take both the conventional Christian morality of Machiavelli's time, but also the dominant liberla values in our modern Western society, as they share some assumptions that lead to their abhorrence of Machiavellianism.

A normative code of conduct is one *'that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational people'.*[25] It would be deemed the most rational code of conduct. However, rationality alone is not sufficient. Rationality is merely descriptive and instrumental. It gives knowledge of what *is*, and can judge which means are appropriate and conducive to which goals. But rationality does not provide the goal itself; the *ought*. This is the required additional element: something that is an end in itself and not a means to something else; something considered intrinsically valuable; an intrinsic 'good'. The intrinsically desired is what bridges the 'is-ought' gap. Machiavellian and conventional morality differ precisely in what each considers an intrinsic good. This difference, in turn, can be traced back to a difference in fundamental ontological-epistemological starting points.

As mentioned in the introduction, Machiavelli had a marked preference for the physical world and sensory cognition of it. This inclined him towards (1) placing intrinsic value on what happens in the *physical* world, making him a consequentialist, and (2) a naturalistic view of human beings, where he gives more weight to natural urges such as aggression, ambition and desire for power. He not only accepts these urges, but may even encourage their manifestation in a controlled manner, as a form of self-realization.[26] These two inclinations lead Machiavelli to consider worldly heroism an intrinsic good.[27] His heroism can roughly be understood as wielding great power to greatly benefit others. Achieving political greatness also requires meeting heroism's criteria. To achieve political greatness is to gain and maintain great political power, and wield it to the people's benefit. We now understand why Machiavelli says one must also have a capacity for evil when necessary. It is probably impossible to fulfill the first part, that of gaining and maintaining great power, without at least some darkness.[28]

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[25] Gert, 2020

[26] This is very similar to the concept of integrating the shadow by Carl Jung, who said he would 'rather be whole than good'.

[27] von Vacano, 2006, p.6.

[28] von Vacano, 2006, p.6. Cesare Borgia was a model of political greatness for Machiavelli due to *'his character, which allowed him to act immorally when necessary'.* Nietzsche made a point very relevant to this precept of integrating both good and evil: that much of traditional morality is merely cowardice. Many proponents of traditional morality were merely too weak to do otherwise. One cannot be good unless one has the capacity for evil.

By contrast, conventional morality has a marked preference both for assuming some kind of metaphysics, and for learning by pure reason from a priori truths. These assumptions manifest themselves ethically in the form of deontological axioms.[29] Deontological axioms are rules that mustn't be breached no matter how much advantage or benefit is yielded *in the physical world*. This betrays an adherence to rules of *a world other than the physical* world, for example a metaphysical one. It is as if deontological axioms are 'anchored' in another world, whereas Machiavelli's heroic act is anchored in worldly benefit. For example, the modern West might claim to be primarily materialistic and scientific, but in being a proponent of human rights, modern Western morality presupposes a kind of intrinsic value of the individual. Since there is nothing in the physical world to establish it as a fact, this belief is, if not metaphysical then at least non-physical. So conventional morality presupposes some kind of dualism, which Machiavellianism does not.

Summary

Throughout this essay, I have tried to use presuppositional analysis as the overarching approach to elucidating various aspects of 'The Prince'. Machiavelli's fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions are that the physical world is the primary reality, that we learn about the world through sensory cognition, and that even reason has to subordinate itself to empirical evidence. Both the instrumental and moral content of 'The Prince' derive from and are consistent with these. When comparing his morality in 'The Prince' with that of traditional and conventional morality, the focus remained on the differences in ontological and epistemological presuppositions. These presuppositional differences incline each side towards a particular view of the world. Machiavelli is more inclined towards the physical world and 'aesthetic reasoning'; traditional morality is more inclined towards metaphysics and abstract reasoning. These different orientations led to their different opinions of what is intrinsically valuable and desirable. Machiavelli deemed worldly heroism to be an intrinsic good, whereas conventional morality often posits otherworldly values. This difference in intrinsic good is what ultimately produced the difference between the normative precepts in 'The Prince' and those of conventional morality.

[29] "The deontological, normative political theory model (...) has, over the years, become the dominant paradigm in the academic study of the discipline. von Vacano, 2006, p.6.

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