

ASSIGNMENT 1

INTRO

In this paper, I will look at the (apparent) split Machiavelli makes between politics and morality and the implications of this distinction. However, I will argue that Machiavelli is not the amoralist that we deem him to be and does not actually divorce morality from politics.

On the surface, Machiavelli seems to take an amoral view of the world. That is, he makes no distinction between good and evil, only between what is useful and not useful in securing the state. This distinction first appears in chapter 15 where he says, "...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" (pp. 42).

He argues that you must 'use that knowledge' to secure your state, even if it is unvirtuous or unethical. He gives many examples such as choosing stinginess over liberality (pp. 43-45) and cruelty over clemency (pp. 45-47). However, he also argues that the prince must 'refrain from using it' under public scrutiny. That is, ideally the prince would be able to exuberate qualities of virtues (such as faithfulness) while in practice, be a great liar and hypocrite (pp. 47-49).

Thus, as a prince, one must be a great actor and learn to balance appearing as good in public (to win favour) and being shrewd in politics (to secure your state).

IMPLICATIONS

If morals do not exist in politics, how sure are we to say that they exist in other domains of life? The main implication of this split between morals and politics is to say that morals, in general, do not exist. There are two further implications to this idea.

Firstly, what would our lives look like? Will people start lying, stealing, and killing just for their own interests?

I argue that although it might seem that people will start killing each other if morals don't exist, there are good reasons for people to work together. Firstly, people are much better off working together than conspiring against each other. One of the reasons why we have gotten to where we are today is due to our ability to communicate and work together. Our likelihood of survival is much higher if we choose to cooperate, divide work, and live peacefully.

Working together may not be the moral choice, but it remains the rational choice.

However, the non-existence of morality has much bigger implications on our legal system.

What gives us the right to judge someone for performing 'immoral' acts if morality does not exist? We might be able to come up with our own arbitrary rules to maintain social cohesion, but it will be difficult to exercise those rules because of the lack of justification for it.

UTILITARIAN?

So far, I have been discussing Machiavelli as someone who believes morals do not exist in politics. However, for Sheldon (pp. 169-177), it is not that Machiavelli believes that morals don't exist in politics, but that a *different* set of morals exist in politics. This is a very subtle distinction. Just because it is impossible to 'import' conventional ethical rules into the political domain, it does not mean that there are no ethical rules in the political domain.

Machiavelli himself says, "*he should not depart from what is morally right, if he can observe it, but should know how to adopt what is bad, when he is obliged to*" (pp. 175). Explicitly, Machiavelli says that there are things a prince is obligated to do (which sounds very similar to a moral obligation) even though it may deviate from ethical norms. I argue that this obligation is no different from a moral obligation. In fact, these 'obligations' are not arbitrary and there seems to be an underlying basis for it. For example, Machiavelli argues that cruelty is much more merciful than clemency because it allows one to rule peacefully (e.g. Cesare Borgia) whilst clemency leads to destruction and ruin (pp. 45). He argues that, in some circumstances (such as the political domain), cruelty may be what is the 'good' thing to do because fewer lives are harmed.

So if Machiavelli believes that ethics exist in a political domain, what is the structure of this ethical framework? I argue that this structure is utilitarian in nature. For example, Machiavelli says, "Such turbulence brings harm to an entire community, while the executions... affect only one individual at a time" (pp. 45). Machiavelli is very clearly making something similar to a cost-benefit analysis. That is, he seems to be concerned with dealing the least amount of harm to the smallest number of people. Sheldon even describes

Machiavelli's political beliefs as that of using the minimal necessary force to secure one's state (pp. 171-172).

However, not everyone who makes a cost-benefit analysis is a utilitarian. What makes Machiavelli so utilitarian-like is the fact that his conception of the 'good' or the 'right thing to do' or 'obligation' is grounded in maximising the welfare of the state while minimizing the force or cruelty necessary for such welfare.

Whether or not Machiavelli was a utilitarian in other domains of his life remains to be seen. However, at least when it comes to politics, we are able to construe Machiavelli as a utilitarian. One whose foundations of good and evil are based on calculating costs (force required) and benefits (well-being of the state).

(902 words)