

MIDTERM PAPER

1. INTRO

In this paper, I will examine how the “gap” between appearance and reality manifests in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*. I will discuss each text individually and show how the worldview that is shaped by this “gap” is different in each text, as well as some implications.

2. THE PRINCE

In his book to the Magnificent Lorenzo de’ Medici, Machiavelli mainly discusses how a prince should act to secure his state. He starts by making a distinction between ‘the way we really live’ and ‘the way we ought to live’. He uses this distinction to show the prince a dichotomy of two modes of being: virtue and vice. Virtues are qualities that are typically considered good (Machiavelli 43). These are qualities typically advocated for in “*Mirrors for Princes*” and were thought of as ‘the way a prince ought to live’. However, Machiavelli (42) argues that virtues are not good enough to secure a state, and may often even lead to its ruin. Thus, he says, a prince must learn how “not to be good”, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires (Machiavelli 42).

I argue that there are two gaps between appearance and reality in *The Prince*. The first gap appears for virtues in general. Machiavelli argues that what seems like a virtue on the surface may, in truth, lead to the prince’s downfall. For example, generosity (virtue) may look good and appease the people in the beginning, however, Machiavelli (44) argues that generosity is

not sustainable in the long run. Generosity will eventually require exorbitant taxes and make the vast majority of people unhappy. On the other hand, being a miser allows the prince to live on his own income, defend himself from enemies, and undertake major projects without levying taxes (Machiavelli 44).

The second gap Machiavelli makes manifests in his advice for the prince. This is a gap between “seeming” and “being”. For example, Machiavelli (48) says that the prince must “be a great liar and hypocrite”. What is the prince being a hypocrite about? The prince might not have many of the virtues that he ‘should’ have, however, Machiavelli argues that it is very necessary that he should *seem* to have them. This distinction between *seeming* and *being* allows the prince to respond according to the times, and “enter on evil if he has to” (Machiavelli 49).

These two gaps form the bases of Machiavelli’s worldview, that is, appearance and reality are completely distinct. For Machiavelli, appearance and reality do not really influence each other (unlike in Hamlet, as we will see later). Appearance is merely used to mask reality either for moral reasons (First gap: masking qualities that lead to the downfall of a state as virtues due to ‘morals’), or for political reasons (Second gap: masking the true nature of the prince).

How will this worldview affect the public? Rousseau (88) argues that as Machiavelli is fashioning masks for princes, he is also unmasking them. Critics argue, however, that Machiavelli could not be writing a book for republicans, because he never intended that they read it (Dietz 779). Regardless, modern day readers of The Prince are armed with the knowledge to avoid being deceived by ‘princes’ as a result of this worldview. Additionally,

readers may be lead to believe that deceit is a necessary evil in politics. This is because for Machiavelli, the gap between appearance and reality is unavoidable. That is, one must be a great hypocrite to survive in politics.

3. HAMLET

Shakespeare's Hamlet is a story about revenge. In Act 1 Scene 5, Hamlet is told by the Ghost of his father (King Hamlet) that his father was murdered by Claudius, his uncle. To enact his revenge, Hamlet chooses to "put an antic disposition on" to deal with his opponents (Shakespeare I.v.179). Thus, initially we are lead to believe that there are two Hamlets:

1. The mad Hamlet that is merely an act
2. The sane Hamlet underneath the madness

The fact that seeming can mask being is of no surprise, that is the insight of Machiavelli. However, does Hamlet really "have that within which passeth show?" (Shakespeare I.ii.85).

At the beginning of the play, Hamlet allows us to believe that he is smart enough to draw the line between seeming (madness) and being (sanity), "for they are actions that a man might play" (Shakespeare I.ii.84). Later on, however, the distinction between madness and sanity gets blurry. Hamlet gets caught in a battle between passion and reason. In one scene, Hamlet restrains himself from killing Claudius because he fears that killing Claudius as he is praying will send him to heaven (Shakespeare III.iii.73-90). Thus, giving in to reason. However, in another scene, Hamlet finds out that there is a spy listening in on him and rashly kills him (Shakespeare III.iv.20-30). Why did Hamlet suddenly kill Polonius (the spy) after acting passive throughout the entire play? Is he still merely pretending to be mad or is he truly mad?

One reason we might believe that Hamlet is truly mad is when the Ghost appears to Hamlet in his mother's closet (Shakespeare III.iv.95-110). The Ghost appears in that scene to tell Hamlet he has gone astray from his revenge. There are a few problems with this scene. Firstly, why did Shakespeare bring the Ghost into that scene? Was it just to tell Hamlet to get himself together? Why was Gertrude unable to see the Ghost despite Hamlet being able to?

I argue that Shakespeare is using the Ghost to tell us that Hamlet has truly gone mad, or at least, is not as capable of controlling his madness as he thinks. In addition to the Ghost telling us explicitly that Hamlet has lost sight of his goal, Hamlet himself seems to acknowledge that he has let his revenge "lapsed in time and passion" (Shakespeare III.iv.100). It is also possible that the Ghost that appears here is merely a figment of Hamlet's madness, since Gertrude is unable to see the Ghost. Although the Ghost that appears in Act 1 is most certainly real, since many others have seen it (e.g. Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus), it is ambiguous whether the Ghost in this scene is real or not. This ambiguity adds to the effect of blurring the distinction between Hamlet's disguise (madness) and being (sanity). There are other scenes that imply Hamlet's madness such as his confusion over his relationship with Ophelia and his later acknowledgement of his own madness. However, I will not elaborate on these.

The difference between the worldview presented in Hamlet and the worldview in The Prince is that Shakespeare tells us that seeming can alter being. That is, acting mad can lead to being mad. However, whether or not seeming and being are distinct in Hamlet is debatable. Some readers of Hamlet argue that acting mad is *no different* from being mad, for all practical purposes (Demastes 33). That is, seeming and being are practically one and the same thing. Machiavelli might argue that human nature is fairly fixed and difficult to change; Merely

putting on a mask will not suffice to change who you are. However, Shakespeare might say that seeming and being are too intricately connected to be distinct categories. When we put on a mask for too long, it becomes a part of us. What use is there in distinguishing between seeming and being, if we are unable to take off the mask?

This worldview tells us that we must be careful of the masks that we choose to put on, because behavioural changes are not as simple as they seem, and can cause changes in our own personality and being. Once an individual internalizes a behaviour, he will find it difficult to separate it from himself. However, there is also a positive spin to this. If we extrapolate this idea to other qualities instead of madness, we can also think that acting like a kind person, a disciplined person, or a responsible person can lead to us becoming actually kind, disciplined, or responsible over time.

4. DISCOURSE ON METHOD

Descartes begins his Discourse on Method in Part One by considering various fields of study. He argues that many of these fields such as history, oratory, morals, and philosophy were built on weak foundations and did not lead to ‘true’ knowledge. However, he held great admiration for mathematics and was astonished that nobody had “built anything more noble upon its foundations, given that they were so solid and firm” (Descartes 5). Thus, he discards anything that can be doubted by him (Part Two) and uses the propositional logic built into mathematics to reach conclusions in philosophy. This method of doubt is crucial to Descartes’ entire text and is what leads him to the gap between appearance and reality.

The gap first appears in Part Four where Descartes (18) says “our senses sometimes deceive us”. How do we know that we are currently in reality and not in a dream, “considering the

fact that all the same thoughts we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any of them being true” (Descartes 18)? This is a gap concerning the external world. He invites us to question: Does the external world truly exist as it appears to us? Does the external world even exist? Descartes argues that we cannot know this because we could be dreaming. What we believe to be reality could be a dream, and what we believe to be a dream could be reality. “For how does one know that the thoughts that come to us in dreams are any more false than the others, given that they are often no less vivid and explicit” (Descartes 21)? Regardless, Descartes believes that human reason is a constant whether we are dreaming or in reality. $2+3$ is still 5, and a square will always have 4 sides in a dream and in reality. These are propositions that cannot be doubted by Descartes and are thus considered ‘truths’.

The sort of worldview that bubbles up from this is initially not so different from Machiavelli’s and Hamlet’s. Appearance and reality are distinct, and appearance can disguise itself as reality. It is, however, on a more epistemological and ontological level. Descartes is not concerned with the masks that political figures should put on like Machiavelli, nor is he concerned with how the masks people put on influence themselves and their social environment (how they interact with people). He is putting knowledge itself on trial. The question he is interested in answering is how do we know what we know? Ideas such as the existence of the external world are taken for granted by us, but they are far from being undoubtable and thus may possibly do not exist (or exist in a different mode) even though they appear to us as real.

There are a great many implications that follow from this worldview. One direct and obvious implication is solipsism, that is, the idea that the only mind that exists is the solipsist’s own

mind. If other minds do not exist, then it is difficult to argue for a moral duty that binds the solipsist to other people. Because other people don't exist. In many ethical theories, one must assume the other person to exist to be able to have a moral duty or obligation towards them. The solipsist will also find it hard-pressed to have a reason for empathizing with people. Because the only emotions and mental states that exist and matter are his own, other mental states do not exist.

5. CONCLUSION

The gap between appearance and reality can be conceived at different levels and our ideas about the gap may change over time, as we have seen from Machiavelli, to Shakespeare, to Descartes.

(2000 words)

6. REFERENCES

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