Difference Between The Political Philosophies Machiavelli And Hobbes

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There are significant differences between the political philosophies developed by Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. First, Machiavelli was a man of action, whereas Hobbes was primarily a scholar and systematic philosopher. Machiavelli worked as a diplomat and civil servant for the Florentine Republic, and his political ideas emerged from his direct observation of rulers, wars, republics, and diplomatic affairs. Hobbes approached politics more theoretically. He attempted to identify general principles of human conduct and use them to explain why political societies are created and why people submit to government.

Despite these differences, both thinkers addressed a similar problem: how can political order be maintained when human beings are motivated by fear, ambition, competition, and self-interest? Machiavelli answered this question by examining the conduct of rulers and the institutions of successful republics. Hobbes began with a hypothetical condition without government and constructed an argument for an undivided sovereign. Both philosophers rejected idealized descriptions of political life, but they reached different conclusions about social conflict, liberty, morality, and the proper structure of authority.

Different Approaches to Political Philosophy

One of the main differences between Machiavelli and Hobbes lies in the methods they employed. Machiavelli's political philosophy was grounded in practical experience and historical observation. His service in the Florentine government brought him into contact with political leaders, military commanders, and foreign courts. After Florence's republican government collapsed, he used his experience and knowledge of Roman history to investigate why states rise, decline, maintain their liberty, or fall under foreign domination. His arguments therefore rely heavily on examples taken from ancient Rome, Renaissance Italy, and the actions of identifiable rulers (Skinner, 1978).

Machiavelli generally examined people as they behaved in actual political circumstances rather than as moral or religious traditions claimed they ought to behave. In *The Prince*, he advises rulers to prepare for betrayal, changing circumstances, military threats, and the unreliability of political allies. His conclusions are not organized into a complete philosophical system. Instead, they appear as practical judgments about acquiring power, preserving the state, and responding effectively to necessity and fortune (Machiavelli, 2005).

Hobbes, in contrast, sought to place politics on a more systematic and scientific foundation. He believed that a political community could be understood by breaking it into its fundamental components, beginning with individual human beings and their passions. He then reconstructed the commonwealth by explaining why rational individuals would establish a political authority. His method was therefore more deductive than Machiavelli's historically oriented approach. Hobbes wanted to demonstrate through reason why peace requires a common power capable of enforcing rules and agreements (Tuck, 1993).

Machiavelli's Division Between the People and the Nobles

Machiavelli argued that every political society contains two major social dispositions or "humors": those of the people and those of the great or noble class. These groups differ in their principal aims and interests. The nobles desire to command, dominate, and sometimes oppress the population, while ordinary people primarily desire not to be commanded or oppressed. This division is not an accidental problem that can be permanently removed. For Machiavelli, it is a recurring feature of political life.

The original contrast between the plebs and nobles is most clearly developed in Machiavelli's discussion of the Roman Republic. He rejected the common belief that disagreements between the Roman Senate and the plebeians only weakened Rome. Instead, he argued that the friction between the two groups contributed to the creation of laws and institutions that protected liberty. The resistance of the plebeians forced the political system to recognize their interests and contributed to the establishment of the tribunes, who could defend the people against abuses by powerful officials (Machiavelli, 1996).

Machiavelli did not suggest that every form of conflict is beneficial. Private violence, factional hatred, corruption, and struggles that place personal ambition above the public good can destroy a republic. However, disagreement can benefit a healthy republic when it is expressed through public institutions and produces laws that limit domination. Conflict between social groups must therefore be directed into legal and political channels rather than simply suppressed. Najemy (2010) explains that Machiavelli used Roman history to explore how social divisions shaped the development of political institutions and the preservation of republican liberty.

This position distinguishes Machiavelli from political thinkers who treat harmony as the natural or ideal condition of society. Machiavelli believed that liberty may depend on recognizing competing interests and allowing them to check one another. A republic becomes vulnerable when the wealthy and powerful can pursue domination without effective resistance from the people.

Hobbes’s State of Nature and Social Covenant

Hobbes did not begin his political theory by dividing society into the plebs and nobles. Instead, he distinguished between the state of nature and civil society. The state of nature is a hypothetical condition in which there is no common authority capable of making laws, settling disputes, or punishing violations. It does not necessarily describe a specific historical era in which every person lived completely alone. Rather, it reveals the insecurity that arises when individuals have no reliable public authority above them.

According to Hobbes, human beings are sufficiently equal in their vulnerability that no individual can be completely secure. A physically weaker person may defeat a stronger opponent through planning, alliances, or surprise. At the same time, people frequently desire the same scarce objects, distrust one another, and seek recognition or reputation. Hobbes identifies competition, diffidence, and glory as major causes of conflict. Under these conditions, individuals must constantly prepare to defend themselves, even when they would prefer peace (Hobbes, 1996).

The state of nature is consequently a state of war, but Hobbes does not mean that fighting occurs at every moment. War also exists when people have a known willingness to use violence and no dependable assurance of security. Productive activity, stable property, long-term cooperation, and social trust become difficult because no institution can guarantee that agreements will be honored. Justice also cannot be effectively established because there is no common law or recognized judge.

Individuals escape this insecurity through a covenant with one another. They authorize a person or assembly to act on their behalf and provide that sovereign with the power required to enforce peace. Importantly, Hobbes’s sovereign does not have to be a hereditary king. Sovereignty may be held by one person or by an assembly. Nevertheless, Hobbes strongly prefers undivided and extensive sovereign authority because competing centers of final power could return society to civil conflict.

Different Understandings of Political Conflict

Machiavelli and Hobbes, therefore, assign very different roles to conflict. Machiavelli sees certain forms of social conflict as unavoidable and potentially productive. In a republic, the disagreement between the people and the elite can produce laws that protect liberty. Properly organized political contention may expose abuses, restrain powerful groups, and allow citizens to defend themselves against domination.

Hobbes treats unresolved conflict as a threat to the existence of civil society. Disagreement is not necessarily forbidden, but no person or institution can be permitted to rival the sovereign’s final authority. Competing claims to supreme power create uncertainty about whose law must be obeyed. For Hobbes, divided sovereignty is especially dangerous because it can turn political disagreement into civil war.

This contrast can be summarized as a difference between the institutionalization of conflict and its authoritative settlement. Machiavelli asks how conflict can be used to create better laws and preserve liberty. Hobbes asks how society can prevent conflict from destroying security. Machiavelli is more willing to tolerate political contention, while Hobbes places a higher priority on a final and enforceable decision.

Human Nature and Self-Interest

Both Machiavelli and Hobbes are often described as pessimistic thinkers because neither assumes that political order can depend solely on human goodness. Machiavelli repeatedly warns that people may be ungrateful, changeable, deceptive, and self-interested, particularly when loyalty becomes costly. A ruler who acts as though every person will keep promises under all circumstances may lose both political power and the state. For this reason, political leaders must prepare for conduct that does not conform to conventional morality (Machiavelli, 2005).

However, Machiavelli does not claim that every person is always evil. People can display courage, public spirit, loyalty, and concern for liberty, especially when institutions reward responsible conduct. His account of human nature is closely connected to circumstances. Good laws, military organization, civic education, and the distribution of political power can shape behavior. Corruption develops when citizens place private advantage above the common good and when institutions can no longer control ambition.

Hobbes also emphasizes fear, desire, pride, and self-preservation, but his theory should not be reduced to the simple claim that human beings are naturally wicked. The central problem is that people cannot confidently trust one another when there is no authority to enforce agreements. Even a person who genuinely desires peace may act aggressively because waiting for another person to attack could be fatal. Rational self-protection can therefore generate conflict without requiring every individual to enjoy violence.

Hobbes also identifies laws of nature, such as the rational principle that people should seek peace when peace is attainable. The difficulty is that these principles cannot provide stable security unless everyone has reason to follow them. Covenants without enforcement remain unreliable. Government solves this problem by attaching predictable consequences to violations and creating conditions in which cooperation becomes rational (Hobbes, 1996).

Morality and Political Necessity

Machiavelli and Hobbes both separate politics from simple applications of private morality, but they do so differently. Machiavelli argues that rulers operate under responsibilities and dangers that private citizens do not ordinarily face. A leader may sometimes have to use force, deception, or severity to prevent a greater political disaster. He does not simply declare that any action is

acceptable. Political conduct must be judged by whether it protects the state, preserves order, and responds effectively to circumstances.

Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* should not be confused with moral virtue in the conventional Christian sense. It refers more broadly to the qualities that allow a political actor to respond decisively and successfully to changing conditions. These qualities may include courage, prudence, adaptability, strategic intelligence, and the ability to use either restraint or force when circumstances demand it. A ruler who is cruel without necessity, destroys the loyalty of the population, or pursues violence for personal pleasure is not following Machiavelli's most careful advice.

Hobbes grounds civil morality more directly in law and sovereign authority. In the absence of a common power, there can be no stable public standard through which disputes about justice are conclusively resolved. Once a commonwealth is established, laws define the rules that subjects must follow. The sovereign makes peaceful social life possible by enforcing agreements and preventing individuals from acting solely according to their private judgments.

Nevertheless, Hobbes does not argue that subjects lose every natural liberty. Most importantly, a person retains the right to resist a direct threat to his or her life. The social covenant is intended to provide protection, and individuals cannot completely surrender the impulse or liberty to preserve themselves. Hobbes's sovereign is extremely powerful, but political obligation is still connected to the sovereign's capacity to provide security.

Liberty, Authority, and the Purpose of Government

The two philosophers also differ in their understanding of liberty. Machiavelli's republican writings associate liberty with freedom from domination and with citizens' ability to participate in defending the republic. The people are often better guardians of liberty than the nobles because ordinary citizens generally seek protection from oppression, whereas elites are more likely to seek power over others. A strong republic therefore requires institutions that give popular interests a meaningful political voice (Machiavelli, 1996).

Hobbes defines liberty primarily as the absence of external impediments. Subjects remain free wherever the law does not regulate their conduct. However, political liberty does not require the sovereign to be constitutionally limited in the modern sense. Hobbes fears that allowing individuals or institutions to decide independently when sovereign commands are legitimate would weaken the common authority and recreate the uncertainty that government was designed to overcome.

For Machiavelli, the state must remain strong enough to resist foreign enemies and domestic corruption, but strength can be supported by active citizens and institutional competition. For Hobbes, strength depends on the concentration of final authority. Machiavelli is concerned with how a state can remain vigorous, independent, and free. Hobbes is primarily concerned with how a commonwealth can protect people from fear, insecurity, and violent death.

Similarities Between Machiavelli and Hobbes

Despite their differences, Machiavelli and Hobbes share several important characteristics. Both treat politics as a distinct area of inquiry that must account for power, conflict, fear, and self-interest. Neither believes that political stability can safely depend on the expectation that people will always act morally. Both also wrote during periods of serious instability. Machiavelli experienced foreign invasions and political changes in Renaissance Italy, while Hobbes developed his mature political theory in the context of conflict between the English monarchy and Parliament.

Both thinkers also recognize that order requires effective institutions rather than good intentions alone. Machiavelli stresses capable leadership, strong laws, civic organization, and military preparedness. Hobbes emphasizes enforceable covenants and a sovereign authority. In each case, political failure results when institutions cannot control ambition, fear, rivalry, and uncertainty.

Their realism, however, should not obscure their different purposes. Machiavelli uses political experience and history to explain how rulers and republics can survive changing conditions. Hobbes develops a philosophical justification for political obligation and sovereign power. Machiavelli gives conflict a possible role in protecting liberty, while Hobbes sees authoritative unity as the necessary protection against destructive conflict.

Conclusion

The political philosophies of Machiavelli and Hobbes begin from a shared recognition that human beings can be ambitious, fearful, competitive, and unreliable. Both reject political theories that assume social order will emerge automatically from moral goodness. However, their approaches and conclusions differ considerably.

Machiavelli was a practical political actor whose analysis drew on historical examples and direct experience. He argued that society contains competing interests, particularly those of the nobles and the people. In a healthy republic, friction between these groups can contribute to good laws and protect citizens from domination. Hobbes was a systematic scholar who began with the state of nature and explained how rational individuals would authorize a sovereign to escape insecurity. He regarded undivided authority as essential because unresolved competition over supreme power could return society to war.

Machiavelli therefore shows how political conflict may be organized in the service of liberty, while Hobbes explains why conflict must ultimately be controlled by a common authority. Their theories remain influential because they address a permanent political challenge: creating an order strong enough to provide security without ignoring the ambitions, divisions, and demands for liberty that exist within society.

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