Machiavellianism Ethics and Political Thought

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The End and the Means in Machiavellian Ethics

"The end justifies the means" is a well-known phrase often attributed to the Italian writer and politician Machiavelli because he expressed thoughts similar to the idea that "the end justifies the means" in his work "The Prince" (1532). However, according to other sources, this quote could have belonged to Ignatius de Loyola. In fact, the issue is controversial, and no final verdict has been reached. For example, the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Winged Words and Expressions states that:

Traditionally, it is believed that these words belong to the famous Italian thinker, historian, and statesman Machiavelli (1469-1527), the author of the well-known treatises" The Prince "and" Discourse on the First Decade of Titus Livia. "But this is a mistake in the creative heritage of this outstanding political analyst of the Middle Ages; there is no such expression. In fact, this saying belongs to the Jesuit Escobar and is the motto of the Jesuit Order and, accordingly, the basis of their morality.

Some of his works survived many publications and were translated into different languages. In them, Escobar tried to justify the Jesuits' casuistic morality and did not hesitate to distort passages from the Holy Scriptures and the fathers of the church. He frankly expressed and developed the idea that the purity of intentions justifies actions that are condemned by morality and laws. The famous "Provincial Letters" of Pascal are dedicated to him, Escobar.

Religious Casuistry and the Historical Critique of Expediency

Even the popes were forced to condemn some of Escobar's provisions, and the Jesuits officially refused to support his views, whereas previously he had played the role of a leading theorist of their morality. The teachings of Escobar were subjected to merciless derision by Moliere, Boileau, and Lafontaine. The word *escobarderie* was even formed from his name, denoting, according to the dictionary of the French Academy, hypocrisy through which a person resolves difficult questions of conscience in a way favorable to his own interests.

Given the chronology, Machiavelli may still be considered the author of the “invention,” while the Jesuits later registered the “patent for the invention.” However, Machiavelli’s “The Prince,” from which these ideas were taken and which later became a “reference book” for some ideologists of fascism and communism, was presented by the author as a gift to the ruling Medici family, who, as is well known, widely applied this principle without its theoretical justification. Thus, determining who first pronounced this idea—Machiavelli or Lorenzo de’ Medici—is hardly possible. Machiavelli was often cursed and condemned and was called an immoral cynic and the author of “instructions for bandits” (a characterization by Bertrand Russell). But in fact, Machiavelli’s moral position and views were much more complicated. His central assertion is that politicians have their own moral logic, sometimes requiring actions for the sake of preserving the state that a refined and decent society may deem reprehensible. In other words, there are times when traditional morality may need to be put aside for the sake of pragmatic and expedient state interests (Dalton & Radtke, 2013).

The exceptionally modern and bold “The Prince” undermines the universal conventions of Machiavelli’s time, whether this is understood as a distinction between morality and politics or as a distinction between two different but equally fundamental forms of morality. It was a strikingly abrupt work in its secularity for the beginning of the 16th century. Of course, the Catholic Church became more vulnerable with the strengthening and rise of influential states that competed for power and with widespread discontent over papal corruption. Four years later, Martin Luther wrote his “95 Theses on Indulgences” and posted them on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, initiating the Reformation and the division of Western Christianity. Nevertheless, it is striking that “The Prince” contains no mention of natural law or of a person’s place in the great divine chain of the universe, ideas to which Renaissance thinkers frequently referred.

Machiavelli’s Political Realism and the Logic of Power

Although Machiavelli is considered an influential political theorist, he did not produce a large body of written work. His principal works include “The Prince” and “Discourses.” Unlike later realists such as Hobbes and Rousseau, Machiavelli does not claim to be the author of a systematic theory of politics. Rather, based on his historical research and practical observations, he tries to establish timeless truths about human social behavior (Hunt & Chonko, 1984) and then transform them into a set of maxims, aphorisms, and prescriptions that can help a sovereign survive in a treacherous and unreliable world. He explores the rich history of classical Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as later political upheavals in Italian city-states, looking for examples of successful and failed political rule.

The motive for writing this treatise was not only Machiavelli’s desire to instruct readers but also his desire for political rehabilitation. Trying to win the favor of the new ruler of Florence, he dedicated “The Prince” to the “brilliant Lorenzo de’ Medici,” who, with the help of Spanish troops, had overthrown Machiavelli’s previous patron, Soderini, a year earlier. However, “The Prince” cannot be

dismissed merely as a model of political opportunism. Machiavelli was a patriot of Florence and wrote, “I love my country more than my soul.” His book also conveys despair over Florence’s decline. Machiavelli’s goal was to identify the reasons for the recent misfortunes and failures of his city-state. Having established what he considered the fundamental realities and rules of politics, he believed that he could help create a state—the best republic—that would be internally stable and able to protect itself from external aggression.

His goal was to resurrect Florence and bring it out of an immoral and weakened state, turning the city into a “strong, united, active, morally regenerated, brilliant and victorious Patria” (homeland) in the image and likeness of Periclean Athens and the Roman Republic. To restore the Florentine state to its former glory, a sovereign was needed who possessed and instilled in his subjects the pre-Christian qualities valued by the great people of antiquity: strength, skill, courage, devotion, civic spirit, and concern for the public interest. At the same time, measures that were usually considered ruthless, treacherous, cruel, and barbarous were thought necessary to rid Florence of its troubles and misfortunes.

Human Nature, Statecraft, and the Moral Limits of Political Action

At the dark foundation of “The Prince” lies a ruthless and unsentimental view of human nature (Fehr et al., 1992; Rauthmann & Will, 2011). Most people, writes Machiavelli, “are ungrateful and impermanent, inclined to hypocrisy and deceit, they are frightened away by danger and attracted to profit.” In such a world, a ruler who behaves strictly according to Christian morality will fare badly. “The distance between how people live and how they should live is so great that one who rejects the real for the sake of what is due acts more to harm himself than for good.” Machiavelli then explains his idea: “It follows that the sovereign if he wants to retain power, must acquire the ability to retreat from good and use this skill, if necessary.”

Machiavelli argues that the private and public worlds have different moral universes with incompatible codes of conduct. Having chosen the life of a statesman rather than that of a private individual, the ruler undertakes to act, and to be judged, according to a separate set of pre-Christian values and principles aimed at creating and securing the “great and glorious state.”

Machiavelli explores the relationship between material forces and human agency through the concepts of fortune and virtue (fate and valor). All sovereigns—and, of course, all people—are subject to social and natural factors that are much stronger than they are. Nevertheless, “we can not be deprived of free will,” says Machiavelli. “Fate controls only half of all our affairs, the other half, or so, it provides to the people themselves.” Although fate can be capricious and historical conditions can impose limits, a skilled ruler can shape his destiny and that of his state by showing valor. Valor should not be confused with virtue as defined by Christian doctrine, which emphasizes qualities such as honesty, mercy, and humility. Rather, valor refers to human qualities valued in classical antiquity:

knowledge and courage, cunning and dexterity, pride and strength.

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