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Machiavelli:

A discussion on the place of morality in politics

Niccolò Machiavelli's The Prince describes a world made up by extremes. Without a middle ground, there is no room for compassion, morality or private conscience. Machiavelli came to this conclusion by analyzing historical periods of turmoil. Based on these situations, Machiavelli felt that deviating from this stringent political behavior would result in a loss of power. Machiavelli's model, however, does not include human nature as a separate factor; human nature is instead an obstacle to be driven over. Methods to deal with the needs of the whole, which are separate from individual desires, are the only permanent aspects in his political discussion. Yet in today's world the state is ideally meant to be more closely connected to the people; the individual needs that he ignores are a critical component of today's state. As such, we cannot closely follow Machiavelli's black and white system. In the case of extremes, such as life or death situations, political behavior will have no reference to morality but return to analyzing only the state of affairs.

Living in and looking to tumultuous times, Machiavelli felt that harsh answers were the only feasible resolutions. Stories of Alexander the Great's conquest and the turmoil amongst the Italian city-states of the 16th century fill his chapters. Every political decision is linked to invasion, assimilation or the consolidation of power. For example, while examining how Alexander the Great's kingdom functioned, Machiavelli points to the flimsiness of the Persian Empire's power structure as the main reason why Alexander was easily able to take and hold its principalities. Alexander was able to conquer the

Persian Empire because the leaders of its principalities were “slaves bound in loyalty to their master...[once they had] been whipped out there is no one left to fear.”¹ The people of the principality and their wishes were of no consequence in Machiavelli’s view; they had no loyalty and would not revolt without strong leaders. In Machiavelli’s own time, Alexander VI’s conquest of Romagna follows a similar pattern. By “winning the allegiance of [his enemies’] high-born adherents by giving them offices and commissions, and honouring them according to their rank,”² he took the leaders from the people and made the leaders his own. Just as in Persia, once “the leaders [were] destroyed, their followers were forced into [Alexander VI’s] camp.”³ Again, the people’s will was of little importance in Machiavelli’s view.

The people were unimportant to Machiavelli in the above-mentioned examples because they had no loyalty and could be manipulated. This basic idea explains much of Machiavelli’s ideology. The conquered peoples will be docile and willing to be ruled once they have been stripped of their leaders. Machiavelli felt that “men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony.”⁴ It is likely that given a less extreme situation the people residing in the same time and place might fight or argue for their previous rulers, but without the backing of their previous leaders and seeing there is no hope, the pragmatist in each of individual wins. Machiavelli relies on the malleability of people; when they are faced with a life or death situation or the loss of a child, and unless that life is oppressed to the point where it is not worth living, people will choose to

¹ Machiavelli, Niccolò. The Prince. England: Penguin Books, 1999. P. 15.

² P. 22, sic.

³ Ibid.

⁴ P. 53.

live. Summed up, “people are by nature changeable;”⁵ they can be counted upon to rely on the state of affairs and remember their own survival. Machiavelli holds that rulers should take advantage of these characteristics.

This Machiavellian view of people’s nature may hold true when faced with extreme situations. Obviously, this does not take into account the less extreme. Machiavelli does not worry himself with singular political unrest or discontent; so long as the prince remains in power he should not worry about the day-to-day problems. By focusing merely on the majority’s will, he does not need to bother with such simple issues. Machiavelli gets away with excluding morality by not taking single human nature into account but instead focusing on group will. When the group is involved what is good for the group is good, whether it conflicts with morality or not. Were single people and their worries important to Machiavelli, morality, conscience and other internal issues would be relevant. As single people do not threaten his power, they are unimportant. Machiavelli does not deny that there is human nature or that people care about singular issues; he simply does not care.

In today’s political world, however, single people are important. Recent analyses of the US election of 2000 point to numbers as low as three to four hundred finally decided the presidency of the nation. Yet, just as in Machiavelli’s day, people’s simplest needs generally dominate politics; only when these needs are endangered and moderate troubles are addressed will morality or conscience, the playthings of individuals, be addressed. On a grander scale, when either the good of a nation or a collection of peoples is faced with a complex or far-reaching decision, these decisions are less reliant on morality or individualistic characteristics. Singular people become less important; the

⁵ P. 19.

good of the whole supersedes the wants of the few in favor of the necessities of the many. As such, the state must analyze the state of affairs and not morality when considering general decisions. Morality or conscience can only come into play under more restrained conditions in which less is at stake. This is not to say that Machiavelli promotes immorality; given the chance, he would most likely suggest it as it would make the people easier to manage. Nevertheless, should the necessity arise, Machiavelli endorses its resolution through whatever means required.

Whenever feasible it is a better choice to follow the path of morality. However, given a situation where morality will cause more harm than help, morality must be thrown into the wind. Morality would be useless if the whole does not survive; no one would be left to practice it. If morality hurts that which it was meant to defend then it forces itself to be obsolete. This is not to say that in every case or any time one person feels wronged they have the right to disregard morality. Only when the good of the whole is endangered may morality be drawn into question. It would be negligent to ignore a solution which might benefit the majority merely because it may not benefit the entirety. Morality is a worthy characteristic as it helps man and women kind to interact with one another; once it crosses the line and hurts the collective, however, it has lost its usefulness, its purpose. The Prince's purpose is to discuss the acquisition and holding of power. As such morality holds no significant purpose. Machiavelli felt this was almost every case when dealing with a principality's populace. While a limited and restricted view, Machiavelli does offer an alternative in his other work Discourses. This work discusses the possibility of republic and how it could work. Nevertheless, with regard to The Prince, Machiavelli does not fit into the modern paradigm. Without moderation and

an appeal to morality whenever possible, governments may become despotic or unrepresentative of their populace. In the absence of a principality as a host, Machiavelli's immoral world would struggle to survive.