Amorality and Justice in Machiavelli's Political Thought

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The adjective 'Machiavellian' is seldom used in any sense other than a pejorative one, usually signifying surreptitious scheming, backhanded treachery, ruthless power play, and the like. The casual reader who has never so much as swum a few strokes in the waters of Machiavelli's thought, but has only observed it from the dry shore or dipped her foot into the most shallow levels, will very likely and readily side with what Strauss considered an 'old-fashioned and simple opinion'[1] that Niccolò Machiavelli is plainly an advocate for evil, for whom being bad is the default way to personal success. Machiavelli's reputation in our times as an amoral political thinker, in whose thought there is no place for justice, undoubtedly stems in large part from this flawed impression that he disapproves of decent behaviour unequivocally.

I disagree, and I argue that Machiavelli's political thought, properly understood, transcends the levels of good and evil, and yet also embraces the notion of just political rule. In that sense, Machiavelli is indeed an amoral political thinker, though not on the basis of his expounding evil, but of his conception of the proper relationship between *virtù*, *fortuna*, and political statecraft. I begin by addressing the precise meaning of the term 'amoral'.

Morality is a set of ideals which demand absolute consistency. For example, the Ten Commandments stated in the book of Exodus in the Bible provide no leeway for extraordinary circumstances that might demand contravening them.[2] Murder committed in self-defence is therefore as valid a sin as murder committed to satisfy bloodlust. Clearly, the terms 'moral' and 'immoral', in their true sense, are non-negotiable labels assigned without consideration of context, in accordance with that corpus of rules; 'moral' denoting good acts that obey the rules in any scenario, 'immoral' denoting evil acts that break them.

'Amoral', in contrast, is a contextual term. It is not synonymous with 'immoral'. To be amoral, to be absent of morals, is to be exempted from similar moral standards, so that amoral acts are judged contextually against the benchmark of necessity instead of morality. An amoral system of political thought such as Machiavelli's must thus not be deemed wholly good or evil if one were to use the term 'amoral' precisely and describe Machiavelli's political thought accurately.

The first step in ascertaining Machiavelli as an amoral political thinker is to note that princes, according to him, live under what is essentially anarchy, 'where there is no court to appeal to'.[3] This is reminiscent of Hobbes's rendition of the state of nature, published about a hundred years later than Machiavelli's work. Like Machiavelli, Hobbes regards rulers as being in a perpetual 'condition of war one against another', given that there is no overseeing authority to govern the international arena and arbitrate disputes.[4] Hobbes goes on to say quite rightly that the logical consequence of such a state of affairs is that 'notions of right and wrong … have there no place'.[5] So is this the case in Machiavelli's political thought. Since there is no court to condemn the wrong or reward the right, every prince, if he is to escape ruin, must have every means at his disposal to secure himself from anyone who might seek to depose him. What is at stake here is the very life of the prince. If he fails to secure himself, he stands to lose much more than his reputation and his principality. This is the distinction between him and his subjects, and why his actions cannot be judged as good or evil, but whether they are effective or not. What matters, Machiavelli tells us, is the 'end' of such actions, and so long as the objective is attained, 'the means will always be judged honorable'.[6]

A vivid example in *The Prince* of the extent of a prince's licence under anarchy comes from the hugely audacious yet stunningly effective actions of Cesare Borgia, who, desiring to tame a very wild population given to crime, vested a brutal man, Remirro de Orco, with authority to quell the unrest of the province very harshly. That aim achieved, Cesare proceeded to have Remirro executed in order to win the battered people over to his side.[7] That Cesare's schemes were successful and garnered praise from Machiavelli[8] should leave no one in any doubt that the prince's actions are amoral because they are judged not according to moral standards, but by how effective they are in securing and strengthening himself and his territory.

While the ends justify the means, there is one restraint the prince has to exercise in relation to his subjects if he is to maintain his power. The 'property and women of his subjects,' Machiavelli advises, is off-limits; unjustly appropriating them for the prince's own benefit yields hatred and contempt from the masses, which are sure to undo his reign.[9] However, one must not be too quick to reckon therefore that Machiavelli is a moral thinker. This restraint is placed upon the prince not in order to make him a morally sound person, but to ensure the survival and security of his reign. Propounding moral actions in service of amoral ends means Machiavelli's political thought remains above morality.

Anarchy is compounded by the element of fortune. Fortune is a mercurial thing, a woman disposed to natures of both benevolent gentleness and wrathful hysteria, assuming either with the greatest ease and readiness, so that she is completely unpredictable.[10] Against the vagaries of fortune, advice leading to strictly moral or immoral ends is the least useful guard. Machiavelli offers nothing of the sort, exhorting the prince to be flexible instead, according to fortune's mood.[11] So long as the course of action is suitable for the circumstances in which the prince finds himself, there is no distinction between right and wrong actions. To borrow Machiavelli's metaphor of building 'dikes and dams' to defend against 'violent rivers',[12] there is about as much morality involved in the prince's actions of securing his reign as there is in the building of dikes before a flood strikes.

The importance of abandoning all scruples and qualms so as to adjust and accommodate oneself to the caprices of Lady Fortuna cannot be overstated. When it is the fortune of a prince to rule over a pack of wolves, he who chooses to behave as scrupulously as a hare is ruined.[13] Likewise, being the devil in a group of angels does a prince scarcely any good. If the people in the province happen to value morals, it is necessary for the prince to veil his innate depravity to appear moral,[14] because against an offended citizenry there is no remedy, 'as they are too many'.[15] Whatever the disposition of the population that fortune has assigned to the prince's rule, he must take that into account and respond accordingly for survival's sake, not morality's.[16]

With anarchy and capricious fortune to contend with, great virtue is indispensable if the prince is to succeed in maintaining his state and attain honour and glory. One must not confuse virtue as Machiavelli uses it with virtue as a moral or good trait. By virtue is meant a host of traits that include 'greatness, spiritedness, gravity, and strength'.[17] An act of virtue, like a virtuoso performance for example, is not about conventional right or wrong. Through the virtues of courage, audacity, and tremendous skill, acts of virtue bestows glory and admiration on the doer. Applying this to politics, the prince who is virtuous and adept at exercising his virtues is capable of leaving the people 'astonished and stupefied', and the soldiers 'reverent and satisfied'.[18] Septimius Severus, who had murdered the incapable Emperor Julianus for the throne, contrived to eliminate potential usurpers of the Roman empire in cold blood, and his daring feat of deception is an act of great virtue by Machiavelli's standards.[19]

Neither can virtue be construed as evil. Machiavelli frowns upon Agathocles's bloodlust that was unleashed to an excess, far beyond what was necessary. Though he was as capable as the most illustrious heroes, nonetheless his actions warrant less respect and glory because he was wanton in the use of his strength, and so his achievements, remarkable as they may be, cannot be said to arise from virtue.[20] Evidently, virtue is a concept that defies morality's labels of 'moral' and 'immoral'. Murder, for instance, can be a legitimate method or not, depending on the prince's circumstances and how far necessity demands it. The prince's virtue ends up being as amoral as the rest of Machiavelli's political thought.

Astute political statecraft results only from great virtue and a forgiving fortune. All the examples of admirable princes which Machiavelli provides that I reproduce here exhibit feats of virtue that are worthy of imitation by any prince who wishes to be as successful. It is ample amounts of virtue that allowed those princes to tide over the waves that

fortune sent their way. Cesare Borgia, for example, should not have been counted among the great, since he attained his principality through his father's 'will and fortune … which are two very inconstant and unstable things'.[21] However, Cesare's subtle statecraft, stemming from his virtue evident in the example provided above, was sufficient to overcome many adversities of fortune by building 'very good foundations' and making every precaution an exemplary prince could possibly conceive to secure his position.[22] No amount of virtue will suffice though, when fortune chooses to unleash all her fury, an example of which is provided by Cesare's utter defeat at her hands when he died too young, rendering all his valiant efforts before somewhat futile.[23]

From those examples above one discerns the proper relationship between virtue, fortune, and political statecraft: political statecraft is the art of protecting the principality by virtue, which encompasses any means necessary, whether against mortal enemies or the volatility of fortune, the latter being capable of upsetting even the most audacious of princes in their attempts to subdue her. The nature of this relationship, which is the heart of Machiavelli's political thought, is saliently amoral; fortune can be a tornado that demolishes all in its path without distinguishing between moral and immoral, right and wrong, while good political statecraft must do away with morality and focus on virtue to devise the most effective means to counter fortune as best it can.

Considering how I have been arguing that Machiavelli's political thought is amoral and unsuitable for labelling as a theory of good or evil, does justice have a place in the prince's conduct? Yes, because everything Machiavelli's advice stems from necessity. A prince should do nothing but what is needed to maintain and secure his state, and everything he does out of that need is just. Even an action that brings immense destruction in its wake to lives and the property of others, such as a declaration of war, 'is just to whom it is necessary'.[24] Anything that exceeds the strict boundary of necessity, such as Agathocles's savage and barbaric mode of statecraft, cannot be just if one adheres to Machiavelli's definition.

Inferring from all that I have said above regarding statecraft, virtue, and fortune, just political rule would result in a state in which the prince would have absolute power over his subjects. The only restraint holding him back from abusing his power and earning contempt and hatred would be his virtue and prudence. He would thus not violate the property and women of his subjects, nor would he need to if he would be prudent and manage his finances properly.[25] He would not have any qualms about silencing anyone within the state who threatens his rule, and would go about it swiftly and resolutely.[26] As for war, he would recognise that having his own well-trained troops are necessary, because the path of reliance upon force that is not one's own is a slippery path to ruin.[27] By these measures, the prince does all that is necessary to enforce his hold over his principality, and that aligns with Machiavelli's notion of justice.

In conclusion, Machiavelli is an amoral political thinker by virtue of his divorcing his thought from judgements of right and wrong, basing it instead on pragmatism and necessity. If we take Aristotle's word as a guiding principle – he says that 'the "nature" of things consists in their end'[28] – then Machiavelli's political thought is the very paragon of amorality. The ends of princes everywhere is the security of the principality, and Machiavelli's book is useful precisely because it speaks of ways in which princes can do that in the most effective manner, instead of preaching about the good or evil nature of safekeeping the realm. Where the preservation of lives are concerned (and not just the prince's, but the lives of citizens too, when principalities are invaded), questions of right and wrong have no relevance.

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[1] Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 9.

[2] Exodus 20:2-17 (New International Version)

[3] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 71.

[4] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), p. 78.

[5] Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1994), p. 78.

[6] Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1998), p. 71.

[7] Ibid., pp. 29-30.

[8] Ibid., pp. 32-33.

[9] Ibid., p. 72.

[10] Ibid., p. 101.

[11] Ibid., pp. 70 and 99.

[12] Ibid., p. 98.

[13] Ibid., p. 66.

[14] Depraved princes exist, or did exist, such as Alexander VI, who ‘never did anything, nor ever thought of anything, but how to deceive men’. Ibid., p. 70.

[15] Ibid., p. 39.

[16] Ibid., p. 77.

[17] Ibid., p. 72.

[18] Ibid., p. 78.

[19] Ibid., pp. 78-79.

[20] Ibid., p. 35.

[21] Ibid., p. 26.

[22] Ibid., pp. 29, 32-33.

[23] Ibid., p. 32.

[24] Ibid., p. 103.

[25] Ibid., p. 63.

[26] Ibid., pp. 37-38, 67.

[27] Ibid., pp. 54-57.

[28] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Baker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1252b27, p. 10.

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