

Plato and machiavelli essay



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Politics is the art of ruling for the benefit of the people. It implies power and power needs to find justification and arguments to support it. This is why there has always been a connection between politics and the principles of morality, no matter if the latter ones supported the former or if they stood in contradiction with it. This paper concentrates on the relationship between the ethics of soul and that of politics in the works of Machiavelli, "The Prince" and Plato's "The trial and death of Socrates".

The similarities and the differences between the conceptions of the two authors are revealed through an analysis of the concept of "virtue" and its connection to the individual's happiness and the well being of the state in the works that were mentioned above. Both Plato and Machiavelli are concerned with the well being of the state and the relationship between the state and the individual. The conception regarding the status of the individual is nevertheless different in their works.

While Plato tries to prove that it is always better to be just than unjust, claiming that there is a strong connection between justice, personal happiness and the well being of the state, Machiavelli underlines the fact that moral principles are not necessarily connected with the efficiency of the act of ruling. If the principles of morality and justice need to be broken in order for the state to be prosperous, than this is how things must be done. The final purpose becomes an excuse for the means that are required in the process.

This is in fact the dilemma that is to be found in "The Prince": how is one supposed to consider justice and morality when a just and moral purpose is

to be served through immoral and unjust means? On the other hand, Plato establishes a connection between the state and the soul of the individual, considering justice as a virtue that is to be found in both these dimensions. The dilemma that occurs in "The trial and death of Socrates" is proving that it is always, regardless of the circumstances, better to act in a just manner.

The decision of Socrates to obey the law, even if that meant dying, is a strong illustration of the conception regarding the respect for the law and what is just. Both Plato and Machiavelli consider that the individuals need the state as a form of organization that is indispensable for their survival and well being. According to Plato, the city (the state) includes the individuals. Thus, a just city automatically means happy individuals. Every citizen, no matter his status must respect the law. Going against the law means doing wrong to the city and thus to its citizens.

Socrates believes that the most valuable possession of an individual is not a material one, but his own soul "Wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything else good for men, both individually and collectively" (Plato, 33). Therefore, self development is the method for achieving richness and personal happiness. The development of the self is connected to the possession of wisdom and wisdom implies knowing that which is good. In this particular case it is good to obey the laws (but is it good to obey the laws if the laws are bad?!).

This is how Plato establishes a connection between morality (doing what is right) and personal satisfaction. Unlike Plato, Machiavelli believes that justice and happiness are not necessarily connected. One of the main similarities

between the conceptions of Plato and Machiavelli is that the state is an instrument for the well being of the individuals. The happiness of the individuals is achieved through the well being of the state. If the state is prosperous then the individuals are happy. The difference occurs when Machiavelli ignores the balance between the happiness of the man and that of the " city".

The personal happiness of the individuals can be sacrificed for the well being of the state. Justice is not necessarily connected to and supported by morality. The main difference between the concept of virtue in " The Prince" and " The trail and death of Socrates" concerns its definition. For Plato, virtue is at the basis of justice. The connection between morality and that which is just is believed to be obvious and unbreakable. The main virtues of a ruler are wisdom, courage, moderation and justice. Good is the foundation of the political order.

And since people are trying to be happy and happiness involves self development and wisdom, consequently, people would be attempting to do only the just things. For Machiavelli however, political virtues and morality are not connected. If morality needs to be disregarded for the sake of the state's well being, then this is the manner in which virtue is achieved. The Machiavellian concept of virtue lacks the moral dimension and is concentrated upon success. If Plato considers that morality is a fundamental condition for the status of leader, Machiavelli thinks the ruler is actually above morality.

The concept of “virtue” in his work does not imply a moral tone but focuses on the art of ruling and going to war. On the contrary, Plato insists that it is better for the individual’s soul to do the correct, just, moral deed regardless of the consequences even upon himself because doing the just thing can only have positive long term consequences on the soul. This is the idea transmitted in “Crito” when Socrates refuses to save himself by escaping. Crito, through his suggestions, places himself above the law, but Socrates prefers to do the just thing (respect the decision of the law even if this implies his own death).

The similarities that are to be found between the “just” rulers in both perspectives concern the need for courage and wisdom. Nevertheless, Plato’s ruler becomes one through his ethical condition, while Machiavelli’s ruler needs to obey just the “ethics” of efficiency. The Machiavellian prince is just even when he does unjust things, if he manages to succeed in his goal that is the well being of the country. Plato’s ruler needs to assimilate the moral imperatives that compel him to do what is right, that is, to rule, while Machiavelli’s ruler is concerned with his image.

He only needs to seem considerate, compassionate, and trustworthy in order to avoid the contempt of the people. He supports his power on fear, not on the love of the ones he rules upon. It is obvious that the moral principles are of small importance. The Socratic view of the leader underlines the fundamental importance of morality. A ruler can be cunning as a fox, but only when in confrontation with deception. At the same time, the ruler must be as fierce and courageous as a lion when he needs to fight against his enemies.

Another difference that is to be found in Niccolo Machiavelli's work is that the ruler must have the ability to relate to the citizens. Plus, he must be an expert in the art of war, which is indispensable for the well being of the state. Virtue is connected first and foremost to the needs of the city, and it has a utilitarian dimension. The main characteristic of the ruler in the Socratic conception is his love for knowledge. The rulers are chosen from the philosophers (" philo" means love, " sophos" means knowledge").

Their moral determination is essential for their status as ruler of the city. One should be concerned only with " whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man" (Plato, 31) The Socratic ruler must always obey the moral imperative and not be concerned with his image and the things that only seem to be right " In my investigation in the service of the god I found that those who had the highest reputation were nearly the most deficient, while those who were thought to be inferior were more knowledgeable" (Plato, 26).

This perspective is different from the Machiavellian one, deeply concerned with the ability of making things " seem" to be in a certain manner " No matter how powerful one's armies, in order to enter a country one needs the goodwill of the people"(Machiavelli, 51). Therefore, the accent is set upon one's reputation. On the other hand, the main characteristic of the ruler in Machiavelli's conception is his ability to rule in an efficient manner " A prince should not deviate from what is good, if that is possible, but he should know how to do evil, if that is necessary" (Machiavelli, 46).

His purpose is the well being of the state, which might be considered an abstract entity to a certain extent, and not the respect for the moral principles. These are disregarded because efficiency implies them being disregarded. In a world where so many people are evil and unjust, being just can only lead to defeat and thus unhappiness for both the state and the people.

Therefore, the ruler must adapt to the circumstances and appeal to whatever is necessary in order to reach his goal “ Force is the most effective and efficient means to do something” (Machiavelli, 82). Since the goal is the well being of the citizens, the goal is a noble one. And it just happens for means that are not noble to be needed in order to reach this noble purpose. This contradiction is solved in the following manner: if the purpose is noble and just then so are the means that serve it, no matter if they lack the moral dimension.

All in all, Plato and Machiavelli deal with the same issues, the benefit of the people obtained through the instrument called the state, but have different perspectives regarding the conceptions of “ just” and “ virtue”. The ethics that they speak about in “ The Prince” and “ The trial and death of Socrates” is a fundamentally different. The ethic dimension in Plato’s work is essentially supported and determined by the moral principles, while Machiavelli defines ethics through a much more pragmatic conception, focusing on the final long term result of the leader’s actions.