

From aquinas to machiavelli – a continuum of political thought



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Ernst Cassirer states in his book *The Myth of the State* that “The Prince is neither a moral nor an immoral book: it is simply a technical book. In a technical book we do not seek for rules of ethical conduct, of good and evil. It is enough if we are told what is useful and useless”[1] Machiavelli’s treatise *The Prince* certainly seems to follow a more technical path rather than a moralistic one. This can be seen from the language and tone that is used throughout the book, but also when compared with Christian writers such as Thomas Aquinas. This essay will try to survey how Machiavelli’s principles align with Aquinas’ in regards to the ultimate political good but also, how they deviate and take a different shape when considering human nature in a comprehensive form and when God is taken out of the equation and given a lesser importance. We will use as a contrast the different attributes that a king should have in each author’s point of view and the implications of different concepts such as war and peace.

Machiavelli’s technical approach can be seen through the fact that he is merely presenting existent notions and not endorsing them through a personal lens. He begins his first chapter by laying out the facts: “All the states and Governments [...] are either Republics or Princedoms. Princedoms are hereditary, [...] or they are new.”[2] He is approaching all of the aspects of a princedom from an objective point of view, while stating both the advantages and the disadvantages of each example, “[...] hereditary States, [...] are maintained with far less difficulty than new States, since all that is required is that the Prince shall not depart from the usage of his ancestors.”[3] More than that, even though Machiavelli is taking a secular stance in regards to Princedoms, he does acknowledge the existence of “

Ecclesiastical Princedoms,”[4] and comments briefly on them “ they are acquired by merit or good fortune, but are maintained without either; being upheld by the venerable ordinances of Religion.”[5] But while Machiavelli gives an all-rounded view of Princedoms and rulers, Thomas Aquinas takes a moralistic, non-secular stance, commenting only on the “ Ecclesiastical Princedom ,”[6] which in his view is the only valid type of princedom. “ But if the government is in the rule of one man alone, it is appropriate to call him king. So, the Lord said in [the book of] Ezekiel, ‘ My servant David will be king all over, and there will be one shepherd over them all’”[7] Thus, Aquinas’ concept of king derives its meaning and authority from God. More than that he clearly states that a king is a representation of God “ This kind of rule belongs to the king, who is both God and man.” This contrast between the two writers allows us to categorize Machiavelli as leaning towards a technical side and Aquinas as endorsing a moralistic, God-driven point of view.

Religion, the core difference notable in the works of Aquinas and Machiavelli, gives rise to another conflict present in their ideologies concerning the absolute political good – namely the contrast between peace and war. Aquinas states that “ The welfare of any organized group is based on the preservation of its unity in what we call peace.”[8] Thus, it is the task of the king to ensure that there is peace in his kingdom. Furthermore, he suggests that the sole purpose of a king is to maintain the peace within his realm “ there is no reason for a ruler to question whether he should maintain the peace of the community under him.”[9] It is clear for Aquinas that as an agent of God, the king must strive to achieve a “ common good”[10] for his

people. Aquinas is also concerned more with the means rather than the end. Thus, we could say that he is valuing the Aristotelian intermediary[11] rather than the final result, “ No one should debate about the end of an action but the appropriate means.”[12] In his view, there is a direct correlation between the means and the end, as reflected in “ Thus the more effective a government in promoting unity in peace, the more useful it will be. We say more useful, because it leads more directly to its end.”[13] The intermediary and the end should be the same so that it maximizes the chances of success, the case at hand being of peace.

Machiavelli, on the other hand, states that a government should have “ good laws and good arms.”[14] He places a great emphasis on war “ A Prince, therefore, should have no care or thought but for war.”[15] Here we can note that there is no morality ascribed to war, instead it is simply regarded as a necessity.[16] Machiavelli gives a different account of the “ common good,”[17] his version being concerned more with the result rather than the intermediary state.[18] His explanation is very logical in that it suggests that even if one kingdom were to be interested solely in peace, and in keeping peace, there would always be neighboring kingdoms that do not have the same intentions. Thus, one can remain unarmed and preach peace, while the enemy is armed and ready to conquer.[19] “ Between an armed and an unarmed man no proportion holds.”[20] This suggests that Machiavelli has a very practical approach that is not concerned with the good or the bad, rather with the survival of the state. His perspective takes into consideration the intricacies of human nature and applies them to different instances, one of them being war.[21] Machiavelli’s model would be better suited in a real-

life situation, simply because while like Aquinas, one may want peace to be both the means and the result, but at the same time one would not be able to anticipate the direction of the thoughts of the other person, or in this hand the other kingdoms. Aquinas himself states that “ it is natural for man to live in association with his fellows,”[22] an association that does not always entail peaceful thoughts. Humans’ social nature and interactions demand a larger perspective and the “ common good”[23] could depend on it. Furthermore, when judging a ruler, Machiavelli is more concerned with the result, stating that “ in the actions of all men, and most of all of Princes, where there is no tribunal to which we can appeal, we look at results.”[24] Thus, a ruler can have very strict measures, but as long as the common good is the result, then the ruler would be deemed as good.[25] It is very interesting to note that while both writers are concerned with the common good, they have extremely different ways in which it can be achieved.

While the addition of religion in Aquinas’ arguments seems to bear a lot of weight when comparing them to Machiavelli’s, there is also a point on which they agree – the ability of the ruler. Aquinas states that “ he has been given the use of his reason to secure all these things by the work of his hands,”[26] which suggests that even though a ruler has the favor of God, he has to have “ reason”[27] in order to obtain his position and eventually keep it. This is strikingly similar to Machiavelli’s own position, as he writes that “ the difficulty of maintaining possession varies with the greater or less ability of him who acquires possession.”[28] More than that, Aquinas’ God takes the form of Fortune[29] in Machiavelli’s argument. But while Machiavelli does not attribute too much importance to Fortune or God[30] he does state that “

Fortune is mistress of one half of our actions, and yet leaves the control of the other half, or a little less, to ourselves.”[31] Thus, ability plays a very big role in both the arguments of Aquinas and Machiavelli and seems to be the pathway to the absolute political good.

While both Thomas Aquinas and Niccolo Machiavelli seem to be arguing for political good, the difference in their perspectives comes down to one question. What motivates them? For Thomas Aquinas, the driving force is God, and this can be seen from the fact that he takes on a very moralistic perspective which is implied from the fact that the means and the end have to be the same – the common good; and that the means help fortify the end. This illustrates the limit of reconciling religion with empiricism, as the premises of religion denounce human observation in favor of the absolute knowledge that is God. On the other hand, since Machiavelli is not very concerned with the importance of God, or even Fortune, his perspective takes on a more realistic and technical front, thus giving more weight to human nature and its inherent implications. But even though the two ideologies stem from different inclinations, they seem to reconcile in terms of meritocracy, giving political thought a form of continuity.

[1] Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* [2] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 1 pg. 1 [3] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 1 pg. 1 [4] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 11 pg. 28 [5] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 11 pg. 28 [6] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 11 pg. 28 [7] Aquinas, *On Kingship*, pg. 16 [8] Aquinas, *On Kingship*, pg. 17 [9] Aquinas, *On Kingship*, pg. 17 [10] Aquinas, *On Kingship*, pg. 16 [11] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 5, page 84 [12] Aquinas, *On Kingship*, pg. 17 [13] Aquinas, *On Kingship*, pg. 17 [14] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 12 pg. 31 <https://assignbuster.com/from-aquinas-to-machiavelli-a-continuum-of-political-thought/>

[15] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 14 pg. 37 [16] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 15 pg. 38 [17] Aquinas, On Kingship, pg. 16 [18] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 15 pg. 38 [19] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 15 pg. 38 [20] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 15 pg. 38 [21] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 15 pg. 38 [22] Aquinas, On Kingship, pg. 14 [23] Aquinas, On Kingship, pg. 16 [24] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 18 pg. 47 [25] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 18 pg. 45 [26] Aquinas, On Kingship, pg. 14 [27] Aquinas, On Kingship, pg. 14 [28] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 6 pg. 12 [29] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 25 pg. 66 [30] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 25 pg. 66 [31] Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. 25 pg. 66