

An analysis of machiavelli and descartes

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The concept of humanity's indecisiveness in its entirety is a theme overwhelmingly reflected by philosophers of contemporary times. Now a dominating staple of the discipline, the thoughts of former savants did not always reflect this principle. It was not until the works of Descartes that the idea of frailty and ambivalence in the human senses came to light.

Through the use of an in-depth mathematically structured argument, Descartes theory eventually generated a wide range of savants who tailored their works to reflect his ideals. One such disciple, Machiavelli, while generating his respective theories ultimately provided a largely different interpretation of the material present in Descartes argument. While at their core, the two philosophers provide a strong appeal as to why man's senses should not be trusted, they deeply contrast in regards to their views on why the senses cannot be trusted, why doubt is initially formed, and the overall solution to the concept of doubt. Descartes' work, *Meditations*, reflects the idea that the body cannot truly be trusted due to its senses' inherent flaw of being unreliable. To Descartes, the idea of existence is contingent upon whether or not an individual can think.

His argument in the matter places a large emphasis on the mind being a superior entity to that of the body in regards to its ability to be determined as existing or not. The body cannot be a truly tangible thing, according to Descartes, because its whole essence can be mimicked through "dreams" (Descartes 60). A dream in its basic definition is simply an illusion. Descartes expands upon this notion by pushing a theory that an evil "deceiver or other" who has an enormous power could be forcing him into any illusion of

its choosing (64). The illusion however physical it can be, cannot destroy the notion that he can think.

Using the example of the deceiver as a springboard for inspiration, Descartes comes to the conclusion that since he is thinking of the process of him being deceived, his mind cannot be an illusion. As the same cannot be said for the body, Descartes remains firm in his claim that the body is too “deceptive” to be trusted (60). “I am, I exist,” this ultimate finality serves to prove his reasons for why he places more credibility on the mind's ability to sense over the body's (64). In direct contrast to the work of Descartes, Machiavelli's work, *The Prince*, champions the manipulation of the physical senses and educates its audience on the dangers of the mental realm. In describing a prince's subjects, Machiavelli states that they are “fickle, feigners and dissemblers,” going in depth on their eagerness to flip sides and act in their own best interests if a situation calls for it (Machiavelli 59).

To Machiavelli, the mind is a fickle instrument that must be controlled by leaders through outward activities which give across the desired facade, which is to make the prince appear “praiseworthy” (61). Understanding how to recognize and execute deception is an absolute necessity if a ruler is to maintain their power; therefore, it can be assumed on this truth, expressed by Machiavelli, that it is the minds of the subjects surrounding a prince which are the biggest deceivers that cannot be trusted. Activities like creating an image of “greatness and nobility” secure “defenses” that prevent untimely ruination caused by accepting subjects mentally created “promises” as truth (59). In addition to Machiavelli acknowledging that a form of the senses is not to be trusted, he also directly contrasts with the former theory of

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Descartes and urges that there is much more significance in valuing the physical sense than its mental counterpart. The differences between them can be further magnified when looking at how the two philosophers deal with the idea of doubt.

In his work, Discourse on Method, Descartes takes the approach of looking “within” oneself for truths and virtually shuns any outside knowledge, unless obtained through personal experience (Discourse on Method 5, 6). Descartes is an advocate for gaining knowledge from the use of deductive means. As is the case when he comes to the conclusion “I am, I exist” (Meditations 64). Because of this, doubt to him is formed through thought and use of prior knowledge to determine whether or not an issue is worthy to be contested. The same cannot be said for Machiavelli. Machiavelli is much more of an inductive reasoner when it comes to the topic of generating knowledge.

A prince “should read historical works,” and through their observations gained from the material they should be able to apply it to successfully enhance their rule (53). As opposed to gaining knowledge and eventually distrust through looking inside oneself, Machiavelli, not wanting a prince to actually experience failure, places great emphasis on obtaining the two through reading and general observation. In order to remedy the disorientated state which is doubt, Descartes petitions his audience to look towards reason for a clear solution. He provides evidence for his method of using reason through three arguments: the wax argument, the existence argument, and the existence of God argument. In the wax argument present in his work of Meditations, Descartes provides a pathway to a clear concise answer by use of reason.

In the beginning of the argument, Descartes acknowledges that wax can have set characteristics. Upon lighting the aforementioned wax ablaze, however, these initial, once unique qualities, drastically change. It is only through the use of reason that an onlooker of the wax can maneuver through doubt and come to the conclusion that the wax is still the same entity and has only been aesthetically altered. In his existence argument, Descartes also relies on the use of reason to get his point across. When confounded with the predicament of doubting his very existence, Descartes goes through a wide range of thoughts stemming from him questioning his own existence. Staying in a sense of despair until coming to a conclusion, through reasoning, Descartes ponders that since he is deceived, his mind must exist.

Therefore, defeating any notion that he doesn't exist at all. Finally, in his existence of God argument from Discourse on Method, Descartes once again uses reason to gain a final truth. He first proves to himself that he is imperfect and acknowledges the fact of his inherent knowledge of perfection. Since he is imperfect he comes to conclusion that there can only be a more perfect being or God that has instilled within him the knowledge of perfection, thus dispelling the doubt of God and proving his existence. Unlike Descartes, Machiavelli's solution to doubt does not stem from a singular source.

Instead, Machiavelli removes doubt through observation, education, and action. To remedy doubt in gaining more followers, Machiavelli makes it clear to the prince that they should observe the world around them. A prince should be particularly observant while making promises in order to obtain followers. To Machiavelli, this is an undeniable truth due to a prince being

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able to benefit by retracting his promise when conditions make it “ no longer relevant,” thus allowing him to virtually gain followers without compromising anything (62). Education is another virtue that Machiavelli demonstrates can resolve doubt.

By reading “ historical works” and learning about previous successful leaders a prince can go into the future with a layout that prevents confusion, and allows them to both imitate what made previous leaders successful and avoid the various pitfalls that made others fail. Being a big believer in the virtue of preparation, it comes as no surprise that Machiavelli’s last virtue lies within using action to destroy any notion of future confusion. This method is on full display when Machiavelli begins his lesson on having a successful military conquest. In order to be successful in war, a ruler must act accordingly to become “ familiar with the terrain” and engage in “ hunting” to “ harden” their bodies in preparation for the days to come (52). Overall, Machiavelli’s methods of dispelling doubt ultimately differ from Descartes, as Machiavelli prefers achieving answers through external means as opposed to Descartes love for finding truths internally.

While both Descartes and Machiavelli challenge what it means to truly understand the senses, the differences between them tell the story of an individualistic approach versus a societal one. Descartes, through his works, finds truth and doubt through looking within himself. He relies heavily on the deductive reasoning of his mind and scoffs at the notion of the body being a reputable source obtaining knowledge. Machiavelli, a direct contrast, asserts the virtues of physical observation and has a general inclination to praise knowledge gained without a direct experience. He finds solace in action as

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opposed to gaining finalities obtained through introspection. Upon further analysis of these two philosophers and their respective beliefs, the dilemma of an individual's experience as both a societal contributor and an independent actor begs for reflection.

If a true trust of the senses of the body and mind cannot be obtained, is it better to become introverted and hide from true relationships or is it more valiant to take the world, in its flawed state, as a natural truth and tailor action through precise calculation?