

A Comparison between the Character of Plato's Prince and Machiavelli's

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ABSTRACT

We can see that the image of the ideal prince of Plato and Machiavelli shows some similarities. There are huge differences between the ways Plato and Machiavelli studies as well as the purposes of their works. Though we can find that both Plato and Machiavelli looking for solutions to social problems from the princes instead of the regimes, their resolutions differ significantly.

Keywords: *Politics, society, Machiavelli, Plato*

1. INTRODUCTION

In general, it is hard and problematic to process an overall comparison between Plato's and Machiavelli's ideas. Plato is usually regarded as the greatest philosopher in human history, whereas as Namazi's arguments, it is even vague that whether we can say Machiavelli is a philosopher ([8], pp171-172). Nevertheless, both Plato and Machiavelli describe an ideal prince in their works. I suppose a comparison between the character of the princes in their works will be helpful to figure out the differences and similarities between their political thinking. Moreover, it is not that hard to process this specific comparison.

1.1. An overall Comparison

Both Plato and Machiavelli play important roles in the history of political philosophy. Plato is the very first one of all studies political philosophy, while Machiavelli, in Strauss' opinion ([9], pp84-89), is the leader of the first wave of Modernity in political philosophy. Yet both Plato and Machiavelli have been regarded as anti-liberal and such infamies. As Demetriou ([6], pp61) points out, Plato used to be considered as an anti-liberal due to a series of philosophical moves and the use of Plato's theories of Nazi. Machiavelli is more like a typical villain: Strauss directly describes Machiavelli as 'an evil man' ([10], pp9), and as Zuckert mentions, Machiavelli used to be called a 'teacher of tyrants' ([13], pp494).

However, to fairly evaluate their political thought, one needs to put them in their political context so that

their genuine intension can be revealed. As Sowell has pointed out in his *Intellectuals and Society*, different social versions are due to different existing social problems ([11], pp94). Both Plato and Machiavelli are disappointed by their governments, but they are disappointed with different things. Plato is disappointed by the unjust trial of Socrates, while Machiavelli is disappointed by the fading away of Italy. As a result, Plato and Machiavelli are motivated by different reasons to reflect on the existent social constructions. In terms of motivations, Plato pays more attention to the justice of the city. On the contrary, Machiavelli cares more about the glory, fame, and unity of the state. Due to this difference in purposes, their works offer suggestions to the prince from different aspects: Plato talks a lot about the inside of a city without dealing much with other countries; Machiavelli's works provide more suggestions on war and other interactions with other countries. As a result, Plato's requirements on the prince are more about the nature and the soul of the country; while Machiavelli's requirements have little to do with the nature of the country. Moreover, Plato prefers to have more theoretical and abstract arguments in his study, as his purpose is abstract and conceptual; while Machiavelli's study relies on historical practice and other real examples to a great extent, for Machiavelli's concern is practical.

There are three results of such different requirements on their princes. First, princes have different motivations to be conscientious and responsible. Plato's prince governs the city carefully because he is virtuous and good and loving his citizens; Machiavelli's prince takes his

country to the heart due to his personal and earthbound desire. Second, Plato and Machiavelli had different defence on their ideal princes' behaviours that are out of common sense. Plato has a series of great arguments to describe a Platonic moral view to show that the nature of such behaviours is goodness; whereas Machiavelli admits such behaviours are evil in themselves, and his princes should do such things merely because they will bring good results (chapter 15 of *The Prince*). Third, Plato insists that his prince should be in the best country: this prince will not even be a prince in other situations, thus Plato's princes' responsibilities are mainly about how to maintain the country; while Machiavelli suggests that his prince should be in a developing country, as he cares about how to reach the ideal country from the current country. In other words, Machiavelli's princes are not only responsible for maintaining the governing, but also for developing the country. This difference is due to that Plato's purpose is a perfect society, which does not necessarily relate to the actual world. Besides, as Plato is arguing about the very best society and country, which cannot be improved anymore, the only job for the prince is to maintain it. On the other hand, Machiavelli's ideal is merely a society that is better than the current one, and his purpose is to figure out a way to develop the current society. In other words, Plato's prince is governing the perfect country, while Machiavelli's prince is governing a country that is in the way to be perfect (by the way, Machiavelli does not seem to believe that there is a perfect country).

1.2. The ideal prince of Plato

1.2.1. Responsibilities of the prince

I suggest that we can figure out the responsibilities of princes by examining their possible mistakes which will lead to the degradation of the city. Plato argues that there is a hierarchy of five different regimes, the ideal city, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Mistakes made by princes leads to such degradations directly.

The first degradation according to Plato is the degradation from the ideal city to the aristocracy. Because of the mortality of everything in our world, princes are going to have wrong successors who are not as virtuous as previous princes (546a), as illustrated in a series of mistakes during the processes to educate them. As a result of the lack of virtues, the new princes will not consider virtues as important as in previous princes. Yet, juniors will still try to behave like seniors. Thus, the leader of the city from a philosopher becomes one who loves honour more than truth. As a result of this change of the governors, 'the Principle of Specialisation in the Guardian class' breaks ([1], pp296). This breakdown brings many problems into the city. This is how the degradation happens, which starts from a wrong successor. Therefore, the responsibility of the prince here

is to educate the successor. Moreover, this responsibility can be a response to Aristotle's alternative answer to the philosopher-king. As Chroust (1968: 17-18) reminds, Aristotle suggests that a philosopher-king can be replaced by someone who recognises philosophers' advice. By considering the genetical theory of Plato, the child of the prince will be the most talented child in the whole city. Yet even this child will accidentally be not good enough for being successor. In the case the prince is replaced into a non-philosopher, the child of this prince will degrade much easier (as in Plato philosophers have the best nature). And therefore, the non-philosopher king's successor will be easier to be a bad successor.

The second degradation of the city is from aristocracy to oligarchy. This degradation follows the degradation of the ethos of citizens. These two sentences express the same thing. As people with money have more and more power, the city turns into an oligarchy. Simultaneously, people lost their respect for virtue and morals. This change brings a series of problems, such as the specialisation can no longer exist under such a society ([1], pp296). It is reasonable to say that a good prince should be able to stop this change. In conclusion, the second responsibility of the prince should be able to process moral education on citizens.

The third degradation is the change from oligarchy to democracy. Plato claims that once princes start degrading, citizens will discover that they have more power than princes. Then citizens will try to get rid of their princes (556d). As a result of the success of the citizens' move, democracy starts. Annas ([1], pp299) argues that the problem of democracy is that the unity of the city breaks completely, and nothing still be common among citizens. The mistake of the prince for this degradation is to lose his prestige, thus they will be despised by their citizens. Therefore, the third responsibility of a prince we can find here is to remain his governing and fame.

The final degradation is to a regime under tyranny. The key to this change is the appearance of 'drones' in citizens, which refer to wrongdoers and loafers (552 c), whose appearance implies the crumbling of the division of labour of the society. Once some drones are appearing in a regime of democracy, they are going to be respected by citizens and the tyranny starts (564d). To prevent this degradation, a prince should display the function of avoiding the overflowing of 'drones' in his city, viz., to increase the rate of employment of citizens.

By discussing the mistakes, the four responsibilities of Plato's princes are clear: to choose the right successor, to process moral education on citizens, to maintain the authority and fame of the government, and to keep the rate of employment.

1.2.2. *The characteristics of the prince*

Plato describes the characteristics of his prince quite directly. There are five characteristics that can be found of Plato's prince, and these five characteristics are all based on one most fundamental character that this prince should be a philosopher.

The most fundamental character of Plato's princes is that they should be true philosophers (473d). Plato argues the prince of his country should know the truth of the world and think like a true philosopher. True philosophers are people who love and know the idea. In the line allegory and cave allegory, Plato differentiates knowledge into 4 different types. The eternal truth is the highest type of all knowledge, and it is knowledge of the nature of everything. Plato also claims that all things about the material world are shadows or phenomena. Thus, Plato's philosopher's knowledge is beyond the material world and about the nature of things. For such a true philosopher, Plato claims that they will not be attracted and cheated by any kind of phenomena. The phenomena here include things like gold, honour, and even common sense. Based on this, we can infer five more characteristics of Plato's ideal princes.

The first is that princes' skills are all designed and customised especially for governing. Indeed, these princes are usually recognised as members of useless people in poorly governed countries as their skills will not help with other things, and thus in such countries, they have no chance to utilize their skills. Plato acknowledges this and uses a captain allegory to explain this: for a captain, who is wise in how to navigate, yet he is physically so weak and pool with power, if mariners take him away from his job, he will be recognised as a useless loafer in the ship. Plato suggests that his prince is just like this captain. These princes seem to be useless and shall not be respectable in cases that they are not playing the role of a prince, as their skills are only designed for being princes.

The second feature is that this prince does not desire to rule the city. Plato claims that nothing brought by being a prince are attractive to philosophers. For people who have cognised that things, money, and power are not attractive anymore as they are not true and mere illusions. In other words, the job of a prince will not bring anything that the perfect prince love. The job of the prince is merely something wasting time for them. A benefit that might be brought by this feature is that these princes will never do things like corruption.

Third, Plato's prince does not feel good with things that are not perfect. In the sun allegory of Plato, Plato claims that goodness exists objectively. Plato claims that all philosophers shall acknowledge that there is something perfectly good and obtain knowledge of it. As goodness is attractive to philosophers, the philosopher-king will try to make the city good and virtuous literally.

Therefore, he shall not compromise with any badness. And as he acknowledges that there is something perfectly good existing, this prince will not be desponded by failing.

The fourth feature of this prince shown here is that this prince will never be blinded by the illusions of good or virtue as he has known the true goodness. Plato claims that as princes have known about the nature of things, they are supposed to be able to easily differentiate the shadows and know which kind of origins the shadows come from.

According to Plato, there is one more character about the princes: the prince should not be limited by common sense. One example is that Plato thinks that his prince should cheat his guardians for the benefit of the city (459 d). In common sense, cheating is bad as it is neither fair nor just. However, Plato does ask his prince not to compromise with badness or evil. In other words, all behaviours of the princes should be recognised as good by themselves. While we can see that Plato asked citizens to be honest. Besides, Duffy ([7], pp1067-1068) also argues that the prince of Plato should be capable of 'harming few to benefit many'. Thus, we can say that Plato's princes' ideas differ from common sense.

In conclusion, we can see the five characteristics over the fundamental character of being a philosopher-king. The five characteristics we have now is that: all the prince's skills are especially designed for governing; the prince does not desire to govern the city; the prince only loves perfect; the prince should never be blindfolded; the prince should be different from common sense.

1.3. *The imaged prince of Machiavelli*

1.3.1. *Responsibilities of the prince*

Quite different from Plato's Prince, Machiavelli requires his prince to materially reinforce his country more than build a virtuous country. In the final chapter of the Prince, Machiavelli entreated his prince, for whom Machiavelli was writing, to 'discover the virtue of an Italian spirit'. As Vatter ([12], pp22) argues, Machiavelli uses the word 'virtue' to refer to 'the capacity to make something out of that situation', viz., properties likewise and power, which have little to do with morality. As was noted, the major motivation of Machiavelli is to retain the glorify and reinforce Italy. The study of history is the most important part and base of all Machiavelli's studies. There are five things according to Machiavelli that we can learn from history in the preface of Discuss on Levi. Thus, it is reasonable to say that these are the five responsibilities of a prince of Machiavelli to glorify his country and the prince himself. I will give some of Machiavelli's examples about how the prince's carelessness on these five terms is harmful to the country.

One example of mistakes in giving laws, as

Machiavelli points out in chapter 37 from the first book of *Discuss on Levi*, is the failure of the Agrarian Law. This Agrarian Law is proved by the Gracchi to limit the Roman nobles. On the one hand, this law limited the number of acres of land each citizen can have. On the other hand, it claims that all land taken from the enemy belongs to the whole people. Machiavelli claims that this imprudent law accelerated the process of the loss of freedom in Rome and lead to a civil war. As a result of a huge injure in nobles' estate and wealth, this law stimulated and aggravated the struggle between the commons and the senate. This is an example of carelessness and mistake in the job of giving laws, which leads to the autocracy in Rome.

The example of Cosimo de' Medici given by Machiavelli in chapter 33 at book 1 of *Discuss on Levi* explains how mistakes in governing the country are harmful. Medici had great fame in citizens. This fame worries the government worry. Thus, Nicolò tried to get rid of Medici. This behaviour provided Medici and his partners a reason to fight against the government publicly. As a result, Cosimo became the prince. Machiavelli claims that the decision to get rid of Medici was not proper and hasty. This is an example of how mistakes in governing the country, in this case especially in dealing with political opponents, hurt.

Developing the military is one of the most important jobs for princes, claimed by Machiavelli in chapter 14 of *The Prince*. An example from chapter 13 of *The Prince* is the example of Greek. The emperor of Constantinople failed in developing the military. He gathered ten thousand Turks in Greek for war. After the war, Turks rejected to leave. Machiavelli claims that 'this was the beginning of Greek servitude under the infidel' (chapter 13 of *The Prince*). This is an example of the importance of developing the military.

The war between the Romans and the Latins is due to a mistake in diplomacy, claimed by Machiavelli in chapter 14 of book 2 of *Discuss on Levi*. When the Latins were attacking the Samnites, the Romans did not support the Samnites to avoid aggravating the Latins. As a result, the Latins thought the Romans were weak and decided to attack the Romans. Machiavelli claims that the Romans should support the Samnites, and this is a terrible mistake in diplomacy. This is how diplomacy contributes to the country.

Extending domination itself is a purpose for Machiavelli, though there are some examples of how it contributes to the country. An example from chapter 3 of book 2 of *Discuss on Levi* is about Roma. Roma destroyed all neighbours, thus people will all come to live in Roma. As a result, Roma had a huge population. This huge population contributes to the military and other things a lot. Machiavelli also claims that this difference in policy is the reason for the greatness of Roma which were reached neither by Sparta nor Athens. This is an

example of how extending domination contribute to a country.

1.3.2. The characteristics of the prince

In chapter 18 of *The Prince*, through a special understanding of the story about Achilles, Machiavelli argues that a prince needs to learn from both humans and animals and added that the best two animals for princes to study are foxes and lions. As a result of this study, Machiavelli's suggestion of characteristics of a good prince can be seen. I summarise the characteristics into 5 terms: having a trend not to hurt mankind, loving fame, having his own morality, being familiar with tricks, and being a lover of military force. I will discuss them in the following paragraphs. Machiavelli's infamy comes from his brutal suggestions to princes. Though we can see that Machiavelli suggests that his works are designed to benefit all mankind in the preface of book 1 of *Discuss on Levi*. However, if we consider the critiques of Machiavelli on tyranny in chapter 10 of *Discuss on Levi* Book 10, Machiavelli does not like or prefer such evil and brutal behaviours. Machiavelli suggests that princes should only use such evil methods when it is necessary for good results. Machiavelli's princes should have such a trend of not hurting mankind. In chapter 27 of book 1 of *Discuss on Levi*, Machiavelli introduces the example about Giovan Polo that he had a chance to murder Pope Julius II for great fame. As Machiavelli's ideal prince should be a lover of fame (this character will be introduced in the following paragraph), Machiavelli's ideal prince have the motivation to do this evil for fame. Yet, if we consider the criticism of Machiavelli about such behaviours from Chapter 26 of the same book, Machiavelli does insist his ideal prince should avoid doing such things.

Machiavelli spends most of his words on accurate suggestions, though he does have a moral discussion in chapter 10 of book 1 of *Discuss on Levi*. In this chapter, Machiavelli clearly expresses that he prefers a prince who works for all mankind instead of working for his own profit. Yet, instead of taking the kindness of princes to be the motivation for princes to do so, Machiavelli suggests that princes should do so for fame. Fame is the most enticement for Machiavelli to encourage princes to work in Machiavelli's way. We can see Machiavelli's critiques on Caesar in Chapter 10 of book 1 of *Discuss on Levi*. Machiavelli suggests that his prince should not behave like Caesar as Caesar has no fame even though his government has a long life. I will say that Machiavelli's prince is a lover of fame as this is the motivation Machiavelli readies for his princes.

We can see that Machiavelli asks his prince to kill all children of himself, if necessary, in chapter 3 of book 2 of *Discuss on Levi*; and not to keep his own words in chapter 18 of *The Prince*. Just like Machiavelli's own words from chapter 18 of *The Prince*, his prince should

know how to do evils when they need to do so. Yet, as Barcenas reminds ([3], pp36-37), by considering the common sense in Machiavelli's period, these claims can merely be against Christian morality. Moreover, as Barcenas claims ([3], pp37-39), there is another alternative morality for Machiavelli. Thus, I will say that Machiavelli's prince should have his own morality.

Benner ([2], pp217) argues that when Machiavelli mentioned that his prince should be like foxes in chapter 18 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli only refers to the ability to recognise tricks. Yet, we can see that Machiavelli suggest the benefit to being like foxes is to avoid being tricked, and in the following sentences, the answer provided by Machiavelli to tricks are tricks. Thus, I can say that being foxes of Machiavelli not only refers to the ability to recognise tricks but also knowing how to use tricks to avoid them. To put it in a formal way, I will suggest that being like foxes is to be familiar with tricks: one can definitely recognise things they are familiar with and can also know how to use these things (tricks) to respond to them.

Almost half of Machiavelli's words in *The Prince* is about the military, thus we can see how important the military for Machiavelli is. There are 3 requirements of Machiavelli's prince concerning the military: training the army, knowing the art of the war, and showing military power constantly. The first two requirements are discussed in chapter 14 of *The Prince* very straitly, the third requirement can be seen from chapter 18 of *The Prince* and chapter 10 of book 2 of *Discuss on Levi*. In chapter 18 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli asks his prince to study lions to frighten enemies. As a result, enemies are afraid of the fame of the military power owned by the prince. In chapter 10 of book 2 of *Discuss on Levi*, Machiavelli gave an example. There was a tribe of Gauls sending envoys to Macedonia to treat for a reconciliation. The king of Macedonia tried to overawe the Gauls with his wealth and treasures instead of his military power. Gauls stopped the negotiations and send an army to rob Macedonia at the sight of treasures. To summarise these requirements, Machiavelli's prince should be a lover of the military.

2. CONCLUSION

Due to the difference I mentioned above concerning the purposes of Plato and Machiavelli, we can see that there are many differences between the responsibilities of the prince suggested by Plato and Machiavelli. Most responsibilities suggested by Plato play roles inside the city and are due to their mental effects. All these responsibilities aim to maintain the virtue of the city, thus there are not only material but also mental responsibilities. On the other hand, the responsibilities suggested by Machiavelli are not only about their internal effects but also about their international effects. Besides, as Machiavelli's purpose is to physically reinforce the

country, Machiavelli's responsibilities as the prince are all due to their physical effects. Machiavelli does have mental suggestions, yet he takes them as means to physical achievements.

Based on such differences in purposes and responsibilities suggested, there are remarkable divergences between the characteristics of their princes. Due to the high requirement on the perfectibility of the prince of Plato, Plato hugely remade the image of the prince from the current image. We can see that the way Plato built his ideal prince is to have the basic character, that is to be a philosopher-king, and relevant details. Thus, the idea of the philosopher-king is quite essential. That makes Plato's prince more ideal. On the other hand, Machiavelli does not have much change in the current image of princes. Machiavelli picks characters from existing princes to build his imagined prince. In this sense, Machiavelli's image of a prince sounds real. Moreover, Machiavelli's princes' characteristics focus hugely on international responsibilities. Yet, Plato's imaged characteristics are totally about internal responsibilities.

Finally, both Plato and Machiavelli tried to find the solution to social problems from the improvement of the prince instead of the improvement of the regime. Similarly, both Plato and Machiavelli find that the regime or the system of the society does not work in both their purposes. On the one hand, we can see that in the degradation described by Plato, the regime itself plays no role to stop the degradation. In contrast, the regime accelerated the degradation from democracy to tyranny. On the other hand, Machiavelli has plenty of examples of how princes' mistakes can destroy both republics and principalities. Quite dramatically, Machiavelli described a loop of regimes in Chapter 2 of book 1 of *Discuss on Levi*. This loop is quite similar to the degradation of Plato, though Machiavelli holds that a good regime is capable to decelerate this loop (but it cannot stop the loop anyway).

Another tricky fact is that both Plato and Machiavelli have a preferred regime even both do not contribute to their purposes. Plato's favourite regime is the regime under the philosopher-king. It would be the only performance of Plato's purpose, namely a virtuous city. Even it is perfect, it will still degrade somehow. The degradation of this best city of Plato is during the princes and have not much to do with citizens. We can see that this best city is hugely dependent on the prince since the degradation of the prince can lead to the degradation of the whole city. Moreover, just like Strauss claims ([10], pp16), Machiavelli spends countless times writing *Discuss on Levi* to encourage princes to build republics instead of principalities. Machiavelli expends that he prefers republics over principalities in chapter 10 of book 1 of *Discuss on Levi*. Though as a politician, who is pretty utilitarian, Machiavelli can only provide one benefit to follow Scipio instead of Caesar.

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