

The Evolving Role of a Supernatural Force in Western Philosophies

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Abstract: *In the Western Philosophies of Socrates, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, their views of God have ranged from theism to atheism, but all have challenged the mainstream views of their times and given a fundamental role for God in the philosophies as well as society, including a perfect commander, a social stabilizer and an answer for insoluble questions.*

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1. Introduction

Since the origin of philosophy took place in Ancient Greece where Socrates expanded his view of nature and reality, the feature of a divine voice has been integrated into all Western philosophies at all stages of their development. Greeks performed formal rituals including animal sacrifice and building temples for their gods. These beliefs and rituals that the Greeks possessed influenced philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, as they were led to contemplate this mysterious yet all-devotional figure, and incorporated the idea that we should follow a 'divine voice' into their philosophies. Subsequently, the power and authority of God were strengthened in the Medieval period when Christianity achieved dominance among the general public. However, it caused philosophers such as Machiavelli to doubt the supernatural force's authority. It also subsequently influenced Hobbes who stands against the dogmatic claims of mainstream religious authorities at his time.

The three philosophers did acknowledge the significance of a supernatural force but also challenged the mainstream views of God in their times, where they all placed philosophy and reasoning as a more authoritative concept than the religion derived from the divine voice. This essay will explore the viewpoints of Socrates, Machiavelli, and Hobbes on the supernatural force. It will also present the shifting roles that the divine voice is assigned in these philosophies.

2. Socrates'S god: an omnipotent commander

To begin with, Socrates was a definite theist who supported the claim of a God's existence [1], yet believed that the divine voice is omnipotent, which contrasts with the Athenian opinion that they are endowed with human qualities of conflict and evil. Even though Socrates was accused and charged with impiety, he makes clear that he both "teaches that there are some gods", and personally "believes that there are some gods" [2]. His coherent assertion proves that he believes in God, which differs from his charges. Though he never outright rejected the standard Athenian religion, Socrates's God was omnipotent and perfectly good, which differed from the Olympian gods, which were a mix of good and evil. According to Lori MacGregor, Athenian traditional Gods were "human-like in knowledge and action", as only their "immortality" and "powers" [3] differentiates them from common people. However, for Socrates, the divine voice has infinite wisdom, morality, which makes it perfectly a good symbol. He asserts that "human wisdom has no value" [2] compared to the overall sagacity of the supernatural force, and that no human can ever achieve the level of wisdom that God possesses. By that, he means that God is a symbol of infinite wisdom, and anything that he orders is a holy instruction.

Furthermore, since he claims that God is completely good in all contexts, Socrates refutes any declaration of a God being able to lie, as he maintains that "he certainly cannot be lying, for that is not possible for him" [2], which indicates that God always speaks the truth and is always good. Thus, it is demonstrated from the reasoning above that for Socrates, God is a perfectly good, boundlessly wise, and moral authentic figure. This breach of opinion between the Greeks and Socrates was one of the major

causes of his charge of impiety, as Socrates found the Greek's concept childish and morally troubling. Athenians misinterpreted Socrates's meaning of questioning the divine voice, as he only doubted the origin and characteristics of the Athenian Gods and its myths, but not the existence of the supernatural force as a whole.

Furthermore, Socrates has a 'personal' God who was a perfect commander for his philosophy and an assessor for society. The role of a leader was significant in his philosophy, as Socrates indicates that he completely defers to the divine voice as he calls out to the Athenians during his trial that he "will obey the god rather than you." [2] His Socratic method of examining people was claimed to be "commanded to do this by the god through oracles and dreams" as well as in any way a "man was ever commanded by divine power to do anything" [2]. This reveals that all of Socrates' philosophy is ordered and justified by a divine voice since all of his actions are "at the god's behest" [2]. The 'personal' God seems like a messenger that delivers all of God's orders and decrees to Socrates that guide him to conduct moral justice. Thus, to Socrates, the 'personal' supernatural force acts as a commander that instructs him to show Athenians their ignorance through his philosophy and the Socratic method. Correspondingly, his method to correct the false beliefs of the Athenians reveals his outlook that "the unexamined life is not worth living" [2]. As he constantly questioned others' perceptions and attitudes, he used the morality of God to assess others. He explained what is right and wrong for a man to execute and believe as "an action or man dear to the gods is pious, but an action or a man hated by the gods is impious" [2]. He used this reference to measure the behavior and convictions of the Athenians and evaluate them as right or wrong by judging whether it was pious or not. Therefore, Socrates utilizes his personal God as an ultimate judge to assess the validity of the acts of Athenians and demonstrate his acts of cosmic justice.

3. Machiavelli's god: a social tranquilizer

In contrast, writing during the Renaissance, Machiavelli challenges the popular notion that people should unfailingly follow the supernatural force. He offers different opinions on having to be religious and believing in the divine voice. Although he might not classify as an atheist since he never directly reflected upon any final divine judgment, he stood outside the framework of assuming the supernatural force that other philosophies in Medieval times are trapped in for his philosophy. He ironically expresses his willingness to fake piety, as he advised Lorenzo that "there is nothing more important than appearing to be religious" [4]. He counseled the same for leaders, as it is more important to "seem to possess" [4] to qualities of virtuousness and piety. The use of words like "appear" and "seem" demonstrate that people don't necessarily have to conform themselves to believe in a supernatural force, which is opposed to most philosophers in the same stage of Western philosophies. Machiavelli holds a different view against the mainstream Christians, who not only firmly believe in God, but also forces this notion upon others. He uses this irony to mock the hypocrisy employed within the religion, as prosecution and banishment have been executed to force all subjects to conform to the religion and its dogmas. Consequently, Machiavelli offers a new insight on the use of divine voice as he criticizes the hypocrisy of powerful religious leaders in his time, and challenges the mainstream views on God.

Moreover, Machiavelli gives God a new role of a social tranquilizer that does not possess any power or authority. He first subtly undermines the power established by religion. By using the biblical characters of Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus, he indicates that they "couldn't have got people to respect their new laws for long" if they "hadn't possessed armed force" [4]. This signifies his disbelief in the fact that merely carrying out God's orders or taking actions under the context of religion will not gain the public's support. It would take real authority, in this case, military force to establish respect for new institutions and laws. Hence, Machiavelli weakens the power of the supernatural force in his philosophy.

Nevertheless, Machiavelli never denies that there is, to some extent, use for God and religion. He illustrates that soldier are doubled in "loyal, peaceful, and full of the fear of God" in the military compared to normal people. He begins his reasoning as a soldier, who "has to promise to die for" his country and is "undergoing infinite dangers every day", would have "more need for" God's "aid" [5]. Hence, the soldier would devote more effort and diligence into maintaining "a greater love of peace" in the society rather than provoking a war. The soldier extracts mental power and comfort from his religion and God, as he is convinced that he has a good cause and emotional reliance on fighting. In this case, people will be often in a state of tranquility and peace for which they are satisfied with their lives, knowing that they a better and more peaceful life to count on if they do good. These religious crowds would have no means to rebel or stir violence in the fear of God, who they expect to rely on the most for protecting themselves. Then, social stability can be achieved through the concept of divine voice as it forces everyone to weigh their pros and cons before causing defiance in the society, acting as a social

tranquilizer. However, without our thinking and reasoning, we would never be able to derive the strength of stability. Thus, Machiavelli suggests that God and religion act as a source of power and comfort for people in situations and maintain social stability. However, he notes that the supernatural force does not dominate any authority, and places it after our reasoning and inner strength.

4. Hobbes's god: answer to supernatural events

Hobbes also counters speculative claims about the existence of God but uses different arguments from Socrates or Machiavelli. He maintains that God is an inexpressible product of reasoning. The supernatural force, in this case, is no more than a 'supposition'. As human beings' natural "Curiosity, or love of the knowledge of causes" results in "the consideration" to "seek the cause", each reasoning leads to the next cause. Hobbes employs the image of the blind man and the fire to explain that the term "God" is a place-holder for something before all causes. The blind man has awareness of the effects of fire, but "has absolutely no idea or image of fire that shows itself to his mind". The same applies to a man who "recognizes that there must be some because of his images or ideas and another prior cause of that cause, and so on; he is finally led to the stopping point or supposition of some eternal cause".

Once he reaches the formal cause, which is eternal and has no further reasoning to be made, the concept of "God" surfaces. This phenomenon is due to our lack of knowledge to further answer the "cause" that covers everything in reality. The concept is the ultimate answer fabricated by ourselves to seemingly complete the quest of nature, yet no image of God can be depicted due to our blindness, just as the blind man's perception of the fire that he feels but cannot portray in his head. Hence, Hobbes delivers his judgment of God as an indescribable man-made concept from deep reasoning. He uses this understanding to indirectly counter the mainstream dogmas that support the authentic existence of God in his time.

Similarly, Hobbes indicates the concept of God is made for answering supernatural and unexplainable events. Since human knowledge is limited, "we are not able to conceive the ends and bounds of the thing named", including our inability to conceive "infinite swiftness, infinite time, or infinite force, or infinite power", as there is "no conception of the thing" This is when the "name of God" is used to act as a resolution towards these mysteries. Even though God himself is also "incomprehensible", but in comparison to paranormal events, we can "honor" the divine voice. In this way, we can put all mystical incidents into one concept, and resolve our curiosity and ignorance by deceiving ourselves to some extent that there is a supernatural force behind these indecipherable phenomena.

This artificial concept seems like a placebo for the wound of ignorance. Therefore, Hobbes points out that the divine voice plays a role in resolving our ignorance and inquisitiveness towards events that are unknown and unintelligible.

5. Conclusions

From the omnipotent perfect symbol that guides Socrates towards moral philosophy and judges the correctness of behavior to the fountain of comfort and social stability in the eyes of Machiavelli, the final answer to all reasoning and explanation to all paranormal events and finally to Hobbes' elixir to fulfill men's moral needs on morality and happiness, the divine voice played an idiosyncratic yet analogous role in every philosophy from these different periods. These different figures in their society critically evaluated the reasoning and thoughts that represented their time and societal backgrounds.

However, the three philosophers all coincided to take in some serious notion of God and give the supernatural force an important role in having a philosophical understanding of human life. In a way, all three philosophers are 'humanists' who raised the power and authority of human reasoning as a more powerful tool in society than the prophecies and speculation of God and encouraged more people to rely on their judgments and thoughts instead of the conventional religion erected from the divine voice.

Author's contributions

Yiyao Xu contributed to the conception of the study and conducted literature research as well as analysis.

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