

Machiavelli's Consequentialism in The Prince: Reasonable or Improper?

Jingtian Wu^{1,a,*}

¹Changjun High School International Department, Changsha, China

^aE-mail: 1459861141@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: This paper discusses Machiavelli's point of view on leaders should behave immorally to achieve success as a consequentialist in the Prince, and three statements that argue against him have been pointed out. The first part of the paper is an introduction to Machiavelli concerning his background information and his consequential opinions of leaders in the Prince. The second part is the disagreement on Machiavelli's view through the perspectives of morality, long-term effects, and feasibility.

Keywords: Machiavelli; Consequentialism, Morality, Success

1. Introduction

“Almost all the political thinkers are interpreted in different ways” (Kocael par. 1)[3]. Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli, an Italian philosopher, politician, and writer who lived during Renaissance, is not an exception in this respect, since whereas his civic republicanism is admired by some scholars, he cannot escape being labeled as the “teacher of evil” (Strauss 10)[6], owing to his understanding of politics independent from traditional morality. His most famous work, *The Prince* (*Il Principe*), brought him a reputation as “an atheist and an immoral cynic” (Mansfield)[5]. He wrote *The Prince* in 1513, just after he was forced to leave Florence as a political exile. Dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici, *The Prince* is Machiavelli's suggestion to the current ruler of Florence on how to maintain power. Machiavelli holds two versions of his consequentialism: one is short-term and another one is long-term. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli concentrates more on the long-term consequence, regarding it as a linchpin for a leader to maintain power. He's general idea in *The Prince* is that a leader should rule a state based on the consequence that brings benefits, so it is wise for leaders to behave immorally, such as lying or misleading, in order to achieve good results. These good results refer to long-term benefits, such as maintaining the legitimacy and staying popular under the leader's reign. To achieve the goals, Machiavelli suggests that “you have to know how to disguise your slyness, how to pretend one thing and cover up another” (Machiavelli 70)[4]. Accordingly, he believes that the capability of deceiving is necessary for a great ruler. In this paper, I will argue that Machiavelli's opinion on leaders fails because his argument violates traditional morality, and the value of his realist philosophy is somewhat short-sighted and unrealistic.

Machiavelli is a consequentialist. “Interestingly, when one reads the Prince, (s)he would say that Machiavelli is indeed immoral and evil as he argues that anything goes in politics on consequential grounds” (Kocael par. 1)[3]. Consequentialism is based on two principles: 1) Whether an act is right or wrong depends only on the results of that act. 2) The more good consequences an act produces, the better or more right that act (BBC)[1]. Therefore, it is reasonable that, as a consequentialist, Machiavelli believes that a good result is always better than a moral process, meaning as long as a consequence is desired, immoral acts are also right acts, so that a leader can deceive people, if necessary, to achieve his or her goal. I think Machiavellian consequentialism is related to the status quo of Italy in the 15th to 16th century. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a consequentialist because he was patriotic and wanted to rescue his homeland, Italy, from western powers. He desired a leader who could revive Italy no matter what he would do. Therefore, he put his idea into *The Prince*, focusing on the consequence of reviving Italy instead of moral acts that a leader should be concerned about.

Machiavelli thinks that a ruler can behave badly as long as he can bring good consequences, conceal his crimes slyly, and not be hated by people. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli uses Pope Alexander VI as an example to emphasize his viewpoint that a ruler can and should deceive people. He mentions

in chapter 18 that “Pope Alexander VI never did anything but con people” (Machiavelli 70)[4]. As the former head of the Catholic Church and the ruler of the Papal States, “Pope Alexander VI always found people he could con” (Machiavelli 70)[4]. “His deceptions always worked because he knew this side of human nature so well” (Machiavelli 70)[4]. This example supports his view that a prince must not only be as beastly as a lion or a fox but also know how to hide it beautifully, “to be a great hypocrite and disguise the slyness” (70)[4] because he saw through human nature: “People are so gullible and so caught up with immediate concerns that a con man will always find someone ready to be conned” (70)[4]. Similar examples like Cesare Borgia and Pope Julius have also been proposed in *The Prince*. According to Machiavelli, “a ruler must avoid any behaviour that will lead to his being hated or held in contempt; every time he manages this he’s done what a ruler should and can indulge other bad habits without worrying about the consequences” (73)[4]. He realizes that it is quite predictable that if you behave too badly (severely impacting others’ normal lives), people will hate you and your success will soon turn to disaster; some immoral behavior brings benefits for awhile yet eventually result in tragedy. Therefore, Machiavelli suggests that, to gain long-term benefits, a ruler should learn how and when to behave badly so that he will not be hated and distrusted, and states that bad behavior can be tolerated as long as it does not influence the consequence. In fact, to be such a leader, the man has to act like the fox, slyly erase his immoral behaviors and demonstrate his seemingly virtuous qualities in front of the public: “a leader does not have to possess all the virtuous qualities, but it is imperative that the leader seems to possess them” (Machiavelli 70)[4].

2. Background

Machiavellian consequentialism believes in the significance of a ruler’s credibility and emphasizes the necessity of behaving immorally for the sake of interests. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that a ruler has to be prepared for the moment when people stop believing him: in this case, “you must be in a position to force them to believe” (23)[4]. From this quote, we can see that Machiavelli highly values a leader’s status in people’s eyes. A good leader should be trusted by the people. If not, he needs to force them to believe him with power and gain credibility. Besides gaining credibility, a leader should learn to lie for his interest. Therefore, Machiavelli states that “a sensible leader cannot and must not keep his word when such an observance would put himself at risk” (Machiavelli 69-70)[4], pointing out that dishonorable behavior is sometimes politically necessary, because “the crowd is won over by appearances and final results” (Machiavelli 71)[4]. Machiavelli thinks it impossible for a ruler to embrace or practice all the good qualities due to the “nature of life” (61)[4]. In my opinion, his reason is that sometimes immoral behavior is needed to achieve success; specifically, the success of gaining steady legitimacy instead of unpopular power. As a consequentialist, Machiavelli regards immoral behavior as right acts if it brings benefits and does not make people hate or distrust you. From *The Prince*, we can see that Machiavelli attaches great importance to a leader’s credibility and prioritizes good consequences. He thinks that a leader should concern about the future of a country and neglect traditional morality as long as his prestige remains and interests unaffected. With all the considerations, Machiavelli is a consequentialist in the truest sense of the word.

3. Perspectives

I totally agree with Machiavelli that “a leader can’t have or practise all good qualities all of the time due to the nature of life” (61)[4]. However, I do not think this is an excuse for a ruler to behave immorally. It is unconvincing that deception or other misleading behaviors will definitely strengthen one’s power and bring good consequences since it is almost impossible for a man to ensure a good consequence in the future—the consequence of the future is full of uncertainty and can be affected by various unpredictable factors. Therefore, I will argue against Machiavelli’s opinion in *The Prince* that it is wise for leaders to lie and mislead in order to achieve success, which is unpredictable. I will object to Machiavelli’s view in three aspects: morality, reality of the long-term effect, and feasibility.

3.1 Machiavelli’s argument on leaders violates traditional morality.

Traditionally, people believe that to be a great person, a man needs to obtain morality, behaving ethically, treating people nicely, not being deceptive, and not deliberately harming anyone. However, as I previously mentioned, Machiavelli argues that a ruler can misbehave for the sake of interests. In fact, we should not condone the immoral behaviors of our leaders. Indeed, every living human being will make mistakes, and leaders are no exception—they also make wrong decisions and act immorally

sometimes. However, we should not lower their moral standards based on their special identity. Specifically, inevitable misbehavior is allowed, while intentional unethical behavior should be criticized even if the purpose of gaining power or better organizing a country is plausible. The overindulgence in allowing immoral behaviors will make the leaders reach out of a yard after taking an inch. As a result, they will become insatiable, more willing to deceive or mislead people to satisfy their unlimited wants, including power, money, women, and slaves, and they might even immorally invade other countries in the name of justice.

In my perspective, to be moral, we are supposed to avoid as many evil deeds as possible. Although misbehavior as part of our nature is unavoidable, we still need to regulate our deeds so that people can live harmoniously. Leaders should also act the same or even stricter since they are the exemplar of a country. Bringing so-called good consequences can never be used as an excuse to behave evilly. Hence, a leader should behave morally to gain respect, use harmless means to achieve success, and avoid unnecessary bad habits as far as they can.

3.2 In reality, although misbehavior may bring good consequences in the short term, it can cause harmful aftermaths in the long term.

Machiavelli uses Pope Alexander VI as an example to demonstrate his correctness of allowing leaders to con people. Nevertheless, Pope Alexander VI could not be considered a great leader; instead, he was infamous for his libertine behavior and nepotism (Tharoor par. 3)[7]. Tharoor[7] uses the analogy to describe how chaotic Pope Alexander VI's private life was: "The intrigues, orgies and skulduggery that took place during his pontificate were enough to lead to a recent Showtime TV series, which reveled in the debaucheries and conspiracies of the Borgia family (par. 3)". Pope Alexander VI's immorality had ruined the lives of people whom he aggrieved. Admittedly, he made some contributions to the country in the short term. For example, according to Catholic Encyclopedia, "Alexander issued a wise decree concerning the censorship of books and sent the first missionaries to the New World" (RAC 290)[2]. However, his successful deeds could not erase the immoral crimes he committed. The crimes of rape, incest, bribery, fratricide, and murder doomed him to notoriety in the long term. It seems that the deceptions of the ruler will not be discovered, yet this is nearly impossible. People are willing to be conned because they are fearful of the ruler who embraces strong power. However, after the ruler dies, the "secret" of deception will spread through society and be remembered by later generations, which is something I think that Machiavelli would not have expected to see as he mentioned in chapter 19 of *The Prince* that a good leader should avoid being hated or held in contempt. Therefore, although Machiavellian consequentialism supports long-term consequence, the misbehavior he mentions in *The Prince* is seemingly to bring benefits for just awhile yet cause more harm in the future.

3.3 Machiavelli's philosophy concerning the method a leader uses to achieve success is unrealistic.

A leader cannot always ensure that the future will be hopeful. Although Machiavelli mentions that people can use their free will to change the upcoming disaster, such as building banks and dykes when the river level is low to prevent the flood (Machiavelli 98)[4], it is impossible that people's effort will always work out. Besides, there can be a variety of ways to succeed, but the leader might not perceive them, walking to an opposite path that he thinks will bring good consequences instead. Imagine a king who believes that the slavery system is necessary since slaves can help him build power and better organize the country. After experiencing the brutality of slavery system can we conclude that this system is evil and detrimental, yet centuries ago, the leaders did not think so. Like those previous leaders, the king will successfully build a slavery system by using unethical acts to enslave people and deprive them of their freedom, which leads to corruption. Although the proper option is to abandon slavery and construct a democratic country, the king wrongly considers the consequence and chooses to build a slavery system. From this example, we can see that a leader might not bring good consequences to the country even if he thinks he would. Thereby, it is unrealistic and too idealistic that a leader will bring good consequences after behaving immorally.

4. Conclusion

I have argued against Machiavelli that leaders should not behave immorally to achieve success, regarding consequence as the foundation of ruling a country, since this contradicts humans' morality, and it is thoughtless and unrealistic. Machiavelli is contradictory, which can be seen from his dramatic,

amoral statements at face value. Most of his examples of leaders mentioned in *The Prince*, such as Pope Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia, and Pope Julius, who “succeeded” by lying, cheating, and 'appearing' good without being good were very short-lived success stories — they ended up falling badly, losing power quickly, and ruining their countries. Machiavelli doesn't mention this, but based on the historical facts, we know that his examples are not long-term successes at all. In fact, to achieve long-term success, a leader should be an exemplar of high morality, making decisions for good consequences based on humans' morality and eliminating avoidable misbehavior.

References

- [1] BBC. *Consequentialism*. 2014. Publisher: *bbc.com*. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/introduction/consequentialism_1.shtml.
- [2] Herbermann, Charles, ed. (1907). *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company.
- [3] Kocael, Ilker. *Machiavelli: evil or angel?* 2015. Publisher: *researchgate.net*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271910197_Machiavelli_evil_or_angel.
- [4] Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. Translated by Tim Parks. *Penguin Classics*, 2014.
- [5] Mansfield, Harvey. "Niccolò Machiavelli." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 Jun. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Niccolo-Machiavelli>. Accessed 25 August 2021.
- [6] Strauss, Leo. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Seattle, Wash.: U of Washington, 1958.
- [7] Tharoor, Ishaan. *7 wicked popes, and the terrible things they did*. 2015. Publisher: *washingtonpost.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/24/7-wicked-popes-and-the-terrible-things-they-did/>.