

Reflections on Machiavelli in the Changing Moral Context

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Western Political Traditions

The moral nature and ideals of Machiavelli, as portrayed in his work The Prince, have long been discussed and debated. Machiavelli has been characterized to such extremes as to be considered both the embodiment of political treachery and a civic visionary. The focus of this analysis is to investigate the moral considerations of Machiavelli's model prince and to examine the image that these qualities create. Specifically, the aim is to determine the nature of Machiavelli's moral framework in light of the concept of moral mutability.

The scholarly article examined in conjunction with this investigation is Terence Ball's "The Picaresque Prince- Reflections on Machiavelli and Moral Change." This article emphasizes apparent connections between Don Quixote's tragic attempt to reinstate chivalry and Machiavelli's prince's ignorant attempt to revive Homeric virtue. Ball compares Machiavelli's prince to Don Quixote in the sense that "both are alike in failing to recognize the mutability of our moral concepts."¹ The thesis of the article is that Machiavelli's model prince is a misguided moralist who attempts to resurrect an archaic heroic code which overlooks the changing nature of human frameworks. Ball supports his thesis with expansive assumptions and analyses drawn from the text of The Prince. First, and most basically, Ball asserts that The Prince is not written as a satire, thus rendering the apparent ignorance of Machiavelli's prince unintentionally comical. Secondly, Ball analyzes the specifics of Machiavellian worldview concerning morality in order to deduct key premises by which moral action is defined. As his central point, Ball seeks to demonstrate that Machiavelli is unaware of the reality of moral change. Thus, Ball portrays

¹ Ball, Terence "The Picaresque Prince- Reflections on Machiavelli and Moral Change" Political Theory 12 (November 1984) 522.

Machiavelli's prince as an ignorant and comic character, for Machiavelli's attempt at reviving a long-lost moral framework is deemed impossible. It is through ostensible evidence of the ignorance of human transition that Ball derives his depiction of the displaced comic prince.

While I agree with many of Ball's underlying assumptions, I do not view these as depicting an ignorant, quixotic prince. Instead, I propose that Machiavelli is aware of the need to update the heroic moral framework, and does so. Thus, the Machiavellian prince appears not comically picaresque but aware and wise. Support for this claim is derived from a demonstration of Machiavelli's knowledge of the evolution of human concepts. Yet, while Ball's overall comedic image of the new prince may be slightly skewed, his underlying concepts remain perceptive and supported. In order to analyze the accuracy of Ball's claims, and, further, to arrive at a differing thesis, a thorough examination of Ball's key assumptions must be made.

I.

Ball's first key underlying assumption is to assert that Machiavelli is a moralist, that is, to characterize Machiavelli as one who "stipulates standards and criteria of virtuous conduct."² Support for this idea is derived from the fact that nowhere does Machiavelli advocate the elimination of a behavioral code, but instead attempts to simply redefine the morals that constitute it. In truth, the entirety of Machiavelli's text is intended to set limitations and guidelines for acceptable human actions. When one gives advice, as Machiavelli does, one is fundamentally asking others to subscribe to a particular behavioral set. While Machiavelli's framework departs from the traditional view of virtuous Christian morality, Ball asserts that Machiavelli can still be judged a moralist through his creation of definitions for justified human behavior.

² Ball, p.521

I agree with this portrayal of Machiavelli, and would additionally state that Machiavelli is moral concerning his awareness of and concern for traditional virtues. Although Machiavelli does offer some implicit criticism of central Christian virtues in the political sphere,³ Machiavelli is not simply the tangible representative of political cruelty as the popular connotation of the word “Machiavellian” implies. Instead, Machiavelli does subscribe to some sort of moral code in keeping with the traditional Christian values of mercy, justice, and honesty. Machiavelli illustrates this presence of moral scruples, for example, in his characterization of Agathocles, who “attained a principality through crimes.”⁴ Machiavelli says, in reference to Agathocles, that “one cannot call it virtue to kill one’s citizens, betray one’s friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion...”⁵ This statement depicts the influence of traditional morals in Machiavelli’s thinking. Machiavelli, while willing to accept some breaks with morality, does not condone the dissolution into complete Christian sin and evil. Further, Machiavelli’s advocating of breaks with traditional morals is conditional, and only justified when the stability of the state depends upon those transgressions. To break with morality for stability is to work for the greater good, therefore justifying specific moral lapses. Thus, the idea that the prince must “learn to be able not to be good”⁶ is tempered with the idea that it would be “a very praiseworthy thing to find in a prince all of the...qualities which are held to be good.”⁷ Following this, Machiavelli is shown to be a moral character with respect to traditional values.

Another of Ball’s key assumptions is the idea that Machiavellian *virtu* is a replica of the Homeric heroic virtue of Ancient Greece. Ball claims that “to be ‘virtuous’ in the Homeric sense

³ Machiavelli’s relationship with and criticism of Christianity would be an interesting area for study, but are not included in the scope of this investigation.

⁴ Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince, trans. Mansfield, Harvey. The University of Chicago Press, 1985. p. 34

⁵ Machiavelli, The Prince p. 35

⁶ Machiavelli, The Prince, p.62

⁷ Machiavelli, The Prince, p.62

requires on occasion that one act in ways that are, by our standards, immoral and vicious.”⁸ What the occasion requires is based upon the concept of role-related specific excellence, where one is compelled by one’s role to the fulfillment of a duty. If this interpretation of Homer is accurate, then links between Homeric virtue and Machiavellian *virtu* are evident. First, Machiavelli illustrates the concept of role-related excellence by counseling his prince use any means to maintain the state. As maintaining orderliness is the prince’s role, he is compelled to break with traditional virtue by necessity. Secondly, Machiavelli puts into practice Ball’s purported “archaic ethic of emulation”⁹ by advising that new princes “consider in [histories] the actions of excellent men.”¹⁰ This Homeric ethic of emulation, rather than the concept of prudent deliberation upon what is just, is a key aspect of Machiavelli’s *virtu*.¹¹ Additionally, Machiavelli makes use of specific examples of leaders that embody Homeric themes. As this, Machiavelli mentions Achilles as a model prince and the centaur Chiron as a political teacher. These ancient heroic themes and examples solidify the link between Homeric virtue and Machiavellian *virtu*.

In sum, Ball’s depiction of Machiavelli as a moralist and his recognition of connection with Homer are essentially supported and appear correct. However, the interrelation of these assumptions requires careful examination before one can wholly assume that the Machiavellian prince is a displaced comic prince.

II.

Further, Ball’s perception of Machiavelli relies upon the idea that The Prince was intended to be taken seriously. Ball explicitly states, “I do not mean to suggest that Machiavelli

⁸ Ball, p. 527

⁹ Ball, p. 529

¹⁰ Machiavelli, The Prince, p.60

¹¹ As an area for further study, this depicts a break with Plato and the Socratic political tradition, as moderation and prudence are not valued as the highest ruling characteristic.

set out to compose a comedy (or a satire either, for that matter).”¹² Here, he rejects the claim that The Prince is an ironic defense of the people against the tyrant, and accepts the view that the work is to be taken literally as a defense of the prince against the people. Ball does not support this claim at any length, although to do so would greatly strengthen his argument. As Ball offers no textual support for this anti-satirical claim, it is impossible for him to fully defend the idea of a comic prince. Ball’s illustration of the picaresque prince is still arguable, but with the wide provision that the anti-satirical interpretation of Machiavelli’s work is accurate. To demonstrate that this area of Ball’s discussion is lacking, it may be useful to briefly describe some evidence for the “political satire”¹³ theory.

There is a significant amount of textual support for the concept that Machiavelli’s work is satirical, or at least was not created entirely for the edification of Lorenzo de Medici, as Machiavelli’s dedicatory letter purports. First, Machiavelli states his intent as “to write something useful to whoever understands it.”¹⁴ This lends credence to the idea that Machiavelli has a wider audience in mind than solely Lorenzo, indicating that his work may have a deeper public-oriented meaning. This quotation also serves as a hint to the careful reader that there is more to Machiavelli’s work than the surface level interpretation. There is further evidence for this claim based upon such concepts as Machiavelli’s sharp prose, his continual reminders that the people will overthrow the prince, and the historical fact that no copy of The Prince has been found in the Medici library.¹⁵ These ideas can be and have been discussed at great length, but here I am simply employing them to illustrate the fallibility of Ball’s argument. If, in fact, satire

¹² Ball, p. 524

¹³ The “Political Satire” theory is not discussed in the scope of this essay, but would be a very interesting topic for further study. There is much scholarly debate centered around the proposed satirical nature of The Prince.

¹⁴ Machiavelli, The Prince, p. 61

¹⁵ These views are primarily indicated in Garret Mattingly’s “Machiavelli’s Prince: Political Science or Political Satire?” American Scholar, 27 (1957-58): 482-491

was intended, Machiavelli's perceived reinstatement of an archaic moral code would be neither serious nor quixotic. Therefore, Ball's perception of Machiavelli's inherent tragic comedy is rendered inaccurate.

III.

In order to refute Ball's thesis, one must support the idea that Machiavelli is aware of the mutability of moral concepts. If Machiavelli is shown to be aware of the temporal, it becomes apparent that there is no blinding ignorance in Machiavelli's definition of a moral code. Though Machiavelli's ideas of virtue and emulation may bear relation to archaic Homeric ideals, analysis illustrates that Machiavelli's prince is cognizant of changing moral frameworks and is thusly not a comic character. He is not overlooking human evolution nor attempting to recreate the Homeric framework. Machiavelli demonstrates his awareness of mutability through his attempts at creating a new, refreshed moral code and through his discussion of human change over time.

One may bring up evidence against Ball's picaresque prince by illustrating Machiavelli's awareness of change. If Machiavelli is aware of moral transition, it holds that he would be aware that the resurrection of an ancient moral code would not constitute a practical framework. The text shows that Machiavelli is fully sentient of the change of human concepts. To illustrate, Machiavelli frequently emphasizes the passage of time. He writes that "time sweeps everything before it"¹⁶ and that it is in error to "never (have) thought that quiet times could change."¹⁷ It seems unlikely that Machiavelli, in this way so aware of evolving circumstances, would ignore the mutability of human moral frameworks. Significantly, Machiavelli is a temporal visionary in that he attempts to look towards the future in order to impose form over chaos.

¹⁶ Machiavelli, The Prince, p.13

¹⁷ Machiavelli, The Prince, p.97

In truth, Machiavelli is not attempting merely to resurrect a copy of the Homeric moral framework. While Machiavelli does look extensively into his conversations with ancients¹⁸ for political wisdom, he is attempting not to recreate an old code but rather instill a new one. This intent can be seen in Machiavelli's assertion of the need for new order and new principalities. He advocates the instillation of form upon matter.¹⁹ This form should create order where there was none, an idea looking towards the future and new modes. Additionally, Machiavelli does not follow the Homeric heroic code exactly, but instead makes modifications due to his awareness of the newer Christian moral virtues and modern examples. Regarding Christian values, Machiavelli feels it necessary to justify the departure from mercy and Christian beliefs rather than to merely dictate that the end justifies all means. The fact that Machiavelli is aware of his ideological conflict with Christianity shows a related consciousness of human moral change. Concerning modern examples, Ball takes a very limited view in asserting that the entirety of Machiavelli's moral code is obsolete in the modern world. Ball states that "(Machiavelli's) prince would have to think and act within the confines of a moral framework that is utterly foreign, not to say unintelligible, to his subjects."²⁰ In fact, it requires no extensive analysis to find that Machiavelli's principles of using fear and force are prevalent even in today's political society. Finally, although Machiavelli advises for new princes to "enter upon the paths beaten by great men,"²¹ he does not appear to have exact replication entirely in mind. He qualifies this advice with the notion that "if (one's) virtue does not reach that far, it is at least in the odor of

¹⁸ The idea of "conversations with the ancients" is brought up in Machiavelli's letter to Francesco Vettori. In our edition of The Prince, this is on p. 107.

¹⁹ It would be interesting to further discuss what "form" this "matter" is ideal in taking, that is, what form of government Machiavelli most approves of creating.

²⁰ Ball, p. 532.

²¹ Machiavelli, The Prince, p.22.

it.”²² This passage demonstrates that Machiavelli is aware of the futility of attempting to become a model of heroic virtue in the modern world. This awareness, in all its forms, demonstrates Machiavelli’s knowledge of the changing nature of human frameworks and ideals.

Machiavelli’s awareness of mutability refutes Ball’s image of a comic prince. Ball’s assertion relies upon the concept that Machiavelli is hopelessly reinstituting a moral framework that is unintelligible to his subjects. However, as Machiavelli’s framework is tempered with Christian morality and modern considerations, the idea that it is entirely incoherent to the public seems a stretch. Ball also asserts that Machiavelli’s prince’s comedic quality comes from “trying to turn back the clock,”²³ an attempt that is contrary to human nature. Thus, as Machiavelli is aware of mutability and the need to update an archaically-based moral code, Ball’s depiction of the comic prince is shown to be largely inaccurate.

Through examination of The Prince focusing upon Machiavelli’s moral codes in relation to human change, a comprehensive image of Machiavelli emerges. Machiavelli is a moralist attempting to draft new guidelines for human behavior. While Machiavelli may draw inspiration for his moral code from archaic Homeric values, in no way does he attempt to recreate this framework. Ball’s image of a comical, picaresque prince is contingent upon the assertion that Machiavelli is ignorant of the mutability of human morals and attempting to instill a hopelessly backward behavioral framework. Thus, Ball’s image is incorrect, as Machiavelli demonstrates that he is neither attempting to replicate outdated frameworks directly nor is unaware of human change over time. Therefore, Machiavelli’s prince is not aspiring to the “impossible... feat of

²² Machiavelli, The Prince, p.22.

²³ Ball, p. 532

resurrecting the dead and turning the vinegar of violence into the wine of civic harmony”²⁴ but is instead a student of temporal thought attempting to reconcile one’s ability to learn from the past with the eternal mutability of human morality.

²⁴ Ball, p. 533.